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Friends or Foes

A Story for Boys & Girls

E. Everett-Green

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"Mr. Leslie has gone and stopped up the gap in the hedge—*our* gap, you know—and has put up a board to say 'No right of way. Trespassers will be prosecuted.'" *p.* 9.

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Friends or Foes?

A STORY

FOR BOYS AND GIRLS.

BY

E. EVERETT-GREEN,

AUTHOR OF

"MARJORIE AND MURIEL;" "BERTIE CLIFTON;" "IN SHADOWLAND;"

ETC. ETC.

London:

JOHN F. SHAW AND CO.,

48, PATERNOSTER ROW.

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FRIENDS OR FOES?

CHAPTER I.

AN INDIGNATION MEETING.

"HALLOO, Madcap! What's in the wind now? You look like a Red Indian in a fit."

"Boys, boys, boys! What do you think? Oh, you will never, never, never guess! Oh, the most beastly shame!" and here Madelaine (or Madcap, as she was invariably called) broke down utterly from lack of breath, and sank down on the grass, panting with excitement and indignation, her cheeks positively flaming with passion, and her eyes glowing with a light that generally meant danger. Her three brothers gathered round her, eager and curious. They were on their way home from the large Grammar School two miles away, which they all attended, and had been

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met on the outskirts of the garden by Madcap, who was evidently brimming over with some piece of news of no small importance.

"What on earth is the matter?" asked Harry, the eldest, a tall lad of fifteen, very good-looking and gentlemanly in appearance, despite the fact that he was in the stage of boyhood generally designated by the expressive term "hobbledehoy."

"Oh, that beastly man! How I do hate him."

Now "beastly" is not at all a pretty word in the mouth of a young lady, not even when the young lady is in short frocks, with her hair flying down her back in a fashion that shows her still to be little more than a child; but then it must be admitted that Madcap was rather too fond of using terms more expressive than elegant, and in excuse it must be remembered that she had three brothers and no sister, and was naturally prone to catch up their phraseology without pausing to consider whether it was quite pretty in her mouth or not.

"What beastly man? What on earth are you driving at? Do make haste and tell us what it's all about."

So said Ben, the youngest of the party, a stout, sturdy urchin of eleven, whose mischievous black eyes under their heavy brows rather belied the habitual gravity of his squarely-moulded features. He and Madcap were great allies, she being but one year his senior. She always knew that whatever

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Harry or Edgar might think, she was certain of sympathy and support from Ben, and now she turned to him with all the pent up eagerness of her excited mood.

"I 'll tell you—though I don't know if you 'll believe it until you go and see it with your own eyes. That beastly man—Mr. Leslie—has gone and stopped up the gap in the hedge—*our* gap, you know—and has put up a board to say 'No right of way. Trespassers will be prosecuted.' And now we shall always have to go round by the road—that horrid, dusty, muddy road—and take twice the time to do it. Did you ever know such a disgusting, horrid shame?"

The boys exchanged glances, and Harry uttered a long whistle. Ben's black eyes twinkled beneath their heavy brows, but he said nothing, and it was Edgar who made the first response.

"Well, that is a go! I call it nothing but a piece of impudence in a new-comer like that. No right of way, indeed? When we have been using it as our own all these years. I should like to know the law of that. We 'll have a talk to father. He won't see being done out of our short cut by a stuck-up *parvenue* like that. Why, Leslie is only a retired sugar-broker or tallow-chandler, or something of an equally aristocratic nature. We won't let a low creature like that get the upper hand of us so easily."

Madcap's eyes shone. She gave a little hop, skip, and jump of delight.

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"That's just what I said, Edgar; but mamma was frightened, and said it would never do to go and take any liberties with other people's property. Poor mamma has no spirit for a good downright quarrel. The first thing she said was that she wished she had called upon Miss Arkley, and made friends with all the crew. She thought then perhaps it might not have happened, as we are almost the only people who use the short cut, and it's plainly meant to keep us out. I suppose the old hag was offended because we didn't call, and that's the revenge they mean to take. I never believed people could be so mean and spiteful."

"I never quite knew why mamma did not call," said Harry. "I'm sure I've heard her talking about it often enough."

"Why, yes, I believe she would have done it if this hadn't happened, but you know papa is rather fussy about making friends with new people, and we couldn't hear anything about this Mr. Leslie, and one didn't know who Miss Arkley was for ever so long. I believe they're all right, and respectable enough in a low sort of way," concluded Madcap, with a toss of her tawny mane that brought a laugh into Harry's eyes. "But except their money I don't believe they've anything to recommend them, as they are turning out such horrid cads. Nobody but a cad or beast would do such a thing as that."

Then Harry laughed outright.

"It's awfully tiresome and provoking, and it'll be

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no end of a nuisance to us having always to go round by the road," he said. "But I suppose, as Mr. Leslie has really bought the place from Sir John, he has a right to do as he chooses. It was all very well for us to do as we liked when the place stood empty, and when it belonged to an old friend who let us make tracks through it; but one always knew that if it let we might have to slack off. At least I used to think so. Though we might have been warned in a more civil way. One does not care to be classed as common trespassers."

"Oh, Harry," cried Madcap reproachfully, "how can you talk about it in that grown-up, cold-blooded way! Just think what it will be to us, and do come and look at that disgusting board, and the way they have stopped up our dear old gap. You wouldn't be so cool over it then. I should like to blow the wretch up in his own house, and see how he'd like that."

"Let's go and have tea first," said Edgar, "and then we'll go and have a look at the enemy's outworks. It strikes me that father will be pretty indignant when he hears. I don't know whether or not anything can be done in such a case, but if it can he'll do it you may be certain."

"I hope he will. I hope he'll go to law. I should love to have a long Chancery suit about it—that would be in all the newspapers, and show everybody in the world what an old beast he was. Why, all the county would cut him then, and he'd have to go away to

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escape the universal odium and obliquity that would fall upon him, and then perhaps the Court of Chancery or Appeal, or something, would give Whitelands to father for a reward, and Redlands and Whitelands would be once more our property. Harry, you need not laugh. I'm sure things like that have happened before, and might happen again. You always laugh when I talk in a sensible way."

"Oh, go on, Mrs. Malaprop! I did not mean to interrupt. I was only wondering what the obliquity would be like that is to fall upon our neighbour."

"You ought to have said obloquy, Madcap," said Ben in an audible aside, whilst the girl tossed her head and "didn't see what the word mattered if only the sense was plain"; and Harry laughed in his good-tempered way, and forbore to tease, as Madcap was in one of her uncertain and fiery moods.

And certainly the provocation was great, and would become greater each week that passed. There is perhaps nothing that so easily irritates the mind, and produces a feeling of anger and hostility, as any interference with what has been considered as a right of way. The two properties of Redlands and Whitelands had originally been one, and had only been divided during the present century by the grandfather of the present Mr. Danvers, who had lost the better part of his fortune over racing, and had had to make great sacrifices in order to keep any portion of the old property. Redlands was the old Manor House, and with

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it went the home farm and a small slice of the once extensive deer park; but the larger portion of the estate had been bought up by some speculator in land (as we should now call it) and a fine though ugly house had been erected on the best site, and the property went by the name of Whitelands, after the original farm house, which had once stood almost on the same spot.

Until recently the Whitelands property had been no thorn in the side of the owners of Redlands. It had been bought by a certain Sir John Ridgmont, and was inherited by his son after him; and an excellent understanding always existed between the two houses. But when Madcap and her brothers were little children Lady Ridgmont's health failed suddenly, and she was obliged to reside abroad. About three years ago she had died, and her husband had such a dislike to the thought of coming back to live in the house without her, that he finally made up his mind to sell it, and remain abroad. Not long afterwards it had been purchased by a certain Mr. Leslie, an utter stranger to the county, who had recently come to reside there, and with him his son, a young niece, and a sister-in-law, Miss Arkley, a rather forbidding-looking spinster, very much older than himself, who had been almost like a mother to her sister, his wife, had nursed her through her last illness, and had ever since remained with her brother-in-law, keeping house for him, and looking after the two children, who had been educated at home.

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This was at present about the sum total known in the neighbourhood about the new-comers, and because so little was known people looked a little askance at them—as in old-world, conservative places it is the fashion still to do; and Mrs. Danvers, a delicate and retiring lady, who always felt it a great effort to make a fresh acquaintance, had never brought herself to the point of calling, although, as she kept saying, she really must do it, as Whitelands was the next house to their own, and they would of necessity be always meeting its inhabitants.

Now, as it happened, Whitelands lay between Redlands and the village of Barnstone, with the church, the post-office, and the village shops, such as they were. By the road it was nearly a mile from the house to the village, but there was a short cut through a corner of the park now belonging to Whitelands that shortened the distance by almost half; and was, moreover, a far pleasanter way of going than by the high-road, with its mud in winter and its dust in summer. All their lives long the children had been accustomed to use a gap in the hedge, and a little gate at the other side, as the entrance and exit to this path through the angle of their neighbour's park, and they had had free leave to avail themselves of the convenience so long as their old friend had been the possessor; nor had it ever occurred to them that any power on earth could hinder them from going in and out at will. The path did not go anywhere near the

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house. It was not even near the preserves, or any part of the property that could be injured by being traversed. Hardly any feet but their own made use of the path, and it seemed to them nothing short of a studied insult to be thus shut out. As Edgar said, when he saw the board, there was an almost pointed insolence in the way in which it was worded. The young Danvers had from the first taken something of an antipathy to their new neighbours, and this turned an instinctive dislike into an open hostility.

"It's plain as a pike-staff," cried Edgar, "the vulgar upstarts are in a rage because we haven't called or taken any notice of them, and they've done this just to spite us. But they've made a precious big blunder if they think to score by that. I believe mamma meant to call before, but now she won't at any price, and there are plenty of people who will do as she does, and everybody will be jolly angry when they hear of this piece of impertinence. We'll soon let it be known, and we'll have our revenge one of these days. I wonder how long it would take to clear out all that furze and wire from the gap, and open it afresh?"

Madcap jumped high into the air with delight at the bare idea, but Harry shook his head doubtfully.

"I don't think that would do much good. He could fill it up as fast as we pulled it down, and after all it *is* his property, although he is a horrid old bear to do such things. We'd better have a talk with father, and see if we can get anything out of him. He may be

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able to see some way out of it. I know there is such a thing as establishing a right of way. Perhaps we have done that by using the path all this time. If we have, he *can't* shut it up against us. I do know so much about the law."

Filled with a hope that their father might be able to help them, the children turned homewards again, still eagerly talking, and found that Mr. Danvers had returned home, and was ready to listen with sympathy to their grievance, which seemed a very large one to them.

Mr. Danvers did not look much like a country squire, and indeed he was less the squire than the barrister, and he went daily to his chambers in the Temple, and looked more to the income derived from his profession than that brought him by his land, for a maintenance for his children and the keeping up of what remained of the old family property. Indeed, had it not been that he had had a moderately successful career at the Bar, he would have been a really poor man; for he had married young a portionless wife, and his father had left him much less well off than he had expected, as there were burdens on the property he had not known of till succeeding to it. Perhaps the worries and struggles he had been through had had something to do with making him a grave and rather severe man, in outward appearance, at any rate. All his children stood somewhat in awe of him, though they held him in great respect, and they always knew

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that in any difficulty or perplexity they would receive from him a patient hearing and such assistance as he felt justified in giving.

Certainly in this instance he did not disappoint them, for he was very indignant at hearing what had been done, and felt that something of an insult had been offered to his children, if not to himself. It might be a little unreasonable from the new owner's standpoint, but it was impossible not to remember that Whitelands had once belonged to the Danvers family, and it seemed on this account exceedingly hard that use might not be made of the footpath across the corner of the park by the old family who once had owned it all. It was not near enough to the house to be the least nuisance, and, as has been before said, there is nothing much more irritating to country people than to be stopped from using an accustomed short cut.

"I should have thought we had established a right of way there by this time," said Harry, when the matter had been fully discussed.

But Mr. Danvers shook his head doubtfully.

"I 'm afraid not, Harry, because the right was granted us by permission from our old friends. If we had established it by our own insistance we might possibly have the right still to keep the path open. But I am afraid the fact that we were granted leave by Sir John and his son to come and go at will puts the matter on a rather different basis. The law on

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such points is very complicated, but I am afraid it would be against us. You know that as long as the Ridgmonts lived at Whitelands we used to go to the house by water whenever we wished, and land in their shrubbery and cross that end of the park; but we should never dream of attempting to claim a right of way through their shrubberies, and I am not at all confident that we have established one here."

Madcap's face fell lugubriously.

"Do you mean, papa, that we must tamely submit to be insulted and trodden upon, and that we can do nothing to resist injustice?"

Mr. Danvers smiled a little as he answered:

"I will write a line to Mr. Leslie, and explain by whom that path is used, and request leave for you to use it still, guaranteeing that you do not stray out of it at any time, and do no harm to the young trees or anything else in the wood. I can trust you to take no liberties, and I cannot conceive that anybody having the least claim to be called a gentleman —as some people say that Mr. Leslie is—could refuse so reasonable a request. If he consents, your mother will call and explain farther how the practice has grown up, and what a convenience the path is to us; and perhaps it may be the means of commencing a pleasant friendship with our new neighbours. If they meet us on this point you must try to be friendly when you presently meet. We know nothing against

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them so far, and it does not do to allow prejudice to take the place of sober judgment."

Madcap and Ben were not quite sure if on the whole they would not prefer the excitement and exaltation of a regular feud with their unreasonable neighbours, but they knew better than to speak in this way to their father, who would perhaps decline to help them if he thought them likely to be foolish and prejudiced in their conduct.

So Mr. Danvers wrote his letter, couched in the moderate and polished terms of which he was master, and it was sent by hand to Whitelands that very evening. By noon the following day a reply had been sent; but to Madcap's intense disgust her mother declined to open it, saying that she would rather wait until father's return; and the impatient girl had to bottle up her feelings until evening, when father and brothers returned almost at the same time.

"Papa, papa, papa, the letter has come! Boys, do you hear? The letter has come. Oh, papa, do make haste and open it! Oh, you don't know how excited I have been all day!"

Mr. Danvers' face was as quiet in expression as usual as he broke the seal, but as he read the few lines contained in the missive, a flush rose slowly in his cheek, and without a word he passed the note to his eldest son, walking into his study and closing the door.

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The children crowded together and eagerly perused it at the same moment. It ran as follows:

"SIR,—In reply to your favour just to hand, I beg to inform you of the fact that I purchased this property with full knowledge of all claims upon it, and certainly the right of way through the top plantation was not one of them. I am intending to preserve a great deal more than my predecessor, and on that account, if for no other, I intend to put a stop to any kind of trespass on the property. I have given my orders with regard to that gap. It is securely stopped, and will remain so. The high road is open to your family if they desire to go to the village. My park is not to be used for that purpose any longer.

"Yours faithfully,

"RICHARD LESLIE.

"WHITELANDS, *April 15th.*"

In mute indignation these words were read, and then the tempest burst forth. As every one spoke together it was not easy to distinguish words, but it was plain that a wild ferment of rage had been stirred up, and that any daring act of folly might easily be perpetrated. Perhaps something of the tumult penetrated to Mr. Danvers in his study, for his door opened after a few moments, and he appeared in the midst of the excited group.

His presence produced a lull. The children all saw that he was angry, and listened eagerly for him to speak. They felt that he sympathised with their indignation; but unluckily, as young folks frequently

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think, the indignation of their elders often takes such an odd form that it is almost worse than indifference. Madcap, dancing about on one foot as was her habit when greatly excited, was full of hope that her father had come to put himself at the head of his household, to go then and there and tear down the hateful barrier before the gap; and she was almost in the act of dashing off to the stables to summon all the men she could find, when she was restrained by the sound of her father's voice, speaking just the very last words she would have expected to hear under the circumstances.

"Now, children, you have got your answer—plainly the only one we shall ever get from our neighbour. I am sorry for your vexation, sorry for the inconvenience we shall all suffer, and sorry that we have such an unmannerly inmate at Whitelands; but we must remember that the property is his, after all, and that a public foot-path may be justly considered a nuisance."

"But it's not like a public path, papa. Nobody hardly uses it but ourselves," said Madcap.

"Quite true, my dear; but a stranger will not realise that, and if he is going to preserve more, he will be more troubled with poachers; and they would find that gap very convenient. However, that is neither here nor there. All we have to think of is that we are excluded; and mind you, I will have no manner of trespassing on the Whitelands property after this. Do you understand me, boys? I say I will have no

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pranks played on Mr. Leslie's ground, no meddling with his fences, no trespass of any kind. No, Madcap, you need not look like that. You are a child. You cannot be expected to understand matters in their proper bearing; but I tell you plainly, that nothing in the world would annoy me more than the thought that after what has occurred between us, Mr. Leslie should ever have it in his power to complain of the conduct of my children. Harry, you at least are old enough to understand something of this feeling."

"Yes, father, I think I do. It would seem to give him a sort of advantage over us if he could make out that we had behaved badly."

"Exactly! and I will not have anything done that could give him the advantage. Do you quite understand that, all of you? No meddling with that gap, no trying fresh cuts across the park. Harry, I look to you as the eldest to preserve order and discipline, and to keep an eye on the younger ones. I shall punish very severely the least breach of discipline in this direction. You all of you thoroughly understand?"

Their disappointed faces showed that they understood only too well. Madcap looked almost sullen, save that the dancing brightness of her down-bent eyes precluded the supposition that she was sulky in the ordinary acceptation of the term. Ben's face was utterly expressionless, and Madcap stole several glances at him as they sat at tea.

They did not talk much that day, for their minds

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were full of their grievance, and their father's last words had put a stop to their former eloquence.

But when the elder boys went off to prepare their lessons for the morrow, and Ben escaped with Madcap into the garden, two curly heads were soon laid together in the close proximity that bespoke the brewing of mischief, and presently there was a whisper.

"Then we will have our revenge after all? We won't be beaten, will we, Ben?"

"Not we," was the confident reply. "Don't you be afraid, Madcap. We'll have the best of it in the long run."

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CHAPTER II.

LANCELOT AND ELAINE.

"I WONDER if we shall get to know any people here?" said Lancelot.

"Oh, I hope not!" answered Elaine with an eagerness that was almost amusing, "I am so tired —so very tired of people. I don't see the good of living in a lovely place like this if we have to know a lot of people, as we did in London."

"Well, it couldn't be like London anyhow; and I suppose there *are* nice people in the world, although we've never met any. There might be some down here, you know, Ellie."

But Elaine shook her head very decidedly, for though a gentle and retiring little maiden, she had very decided views of her own—often more decided than those of the elder and robuster Lancelot.

"I don't much think that really nice people do live —except in books, you know. I only want the people we pretend to be, and make up for ourselves. You

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know we are always happiest quite alone: aren't we now, Lancelot?"

"To be sure we are! And we 'll have no end of fun in this queer old house and lovely garden and park. We can be really mediæval here, and have the most splendid games. I don't think I want to know people any more than you do, Ellie."

"People in the present day are all commonplace and rather vulgar—at least what seems vulgar to me," said Elaine, with a gesture of her dainty little white hands that would not have disgraced a princess. "I want us, Lancelot, to live as if we lived in the days of chivalry. You must be a sort of *preux chevalier*—without fear and without reproach, and I must be your lady-love, or guardian angel, or something of that sort. Only I shall generally go with you and share your adventures, and if I can't always go, you must think of me, and come back soon and tell me all about it."

The two children who were talking in this rather grandiloquent strain were shut up together in a large and handsomely furnished room at Whitelands. It was really the nursery of the house; but Mr. Leslie had unusually lavish ideas as to the plenishing of his house, and his hobby was that everything should be very sumptuous in character—too sumptuous, indeed, to be good for children, though these two cousins seemed to suit their surroundings better than some boys and girls would do. Elaine was very small for eleven years, and as white as a lily, fragile and ethereal-

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looking, with a cloud of silken curls about her head, and eyes of the deepest violet, looking out earnestly and dreamily upon the world of which she knew so little. She was very delicate, although rarely ill, and the heat and noise and bustle of London had been a scource of perpetual distress to her, although she had hardly been aware of it. She had been brought up with Lancelot ever since she could remember, and the pair were like brother and sister; but in reality they were only cousins, for Elaine was really the child of Lancelot's mother's brother, and had been adopted by her on that brother's death, when the little one had been left an orphan at the age of two years.

"The advantage of that is that I can marry her when I am old enough," Lancelot had gravely remarked to his mother when he was seven years old, and had just discovered, after deep study of the "Table of Affinities" in his new Prayer-book, that he could not marry his sister. "I never thought of that before, but it certainly is a great advantage"; and it was an advantage of which he reminded Elaine from time to time, though she always answered that she didn't see the sense of people marrying. It was much more chivalrous to have lady-loves than wives. She would always be a lady-love; but she did not think she should ever care to get married. Things always got stupid after that.

The children had been strangely brought up. Mr. Leslie, although coming of a good family, had made

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his money in trade, as his father had done before him, and he had rather prided himself in not holding aloof from the men with whom he commonly associated in the city. He had made no effort to obtain an entrance into "good society," for he had always entertained the idea of giving up business eventually, and settling down in the country to end his days, when it would be time enough to try and rise in the social scale. He had always decided to do this as soon as Lancelot reached an age when the companionship of boys of his own age seemed desirable. So far he and his cousin had been quite satisfied to be left together with their governess or tutor, and as long as they were happy there seemed no need to disturb the even tenor of their life. But he was more ambitious for the boy than for himself, and was determined that Lancelot should know nothing of city life, or city men; and so no little friends had ever invaded the nursery or schoolroom of the two lonely children, and it was not to be greatly wondered at that Elaine should have grown up with the idea that all persons in the present day were a little vulgar. Certainly the stout and pompous old gentlemen she had occasionally seen in the dining-room or drawing-room in the London home contrasted unfavourably with the heroes of her favourite romances, in their slashed doublets and silken hose. No elegant ladies or dignified matrons had ever crossed her line of vision, and she had quite decided that the age of chivalry

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must have gone out with plumed hats and gilded rapiers.

The aunt who was mistress of the establishment did little to train the child's vivid imagination. She was a very good and worthy woman, and did her duty most admirably by the children and her brother-in-law's household; but she did not understand the ways or the thoughts of the young, and they had nothing in common with her, so that practically the boy and girl were as much alone as if they had been actually orphans, as indeed little Elaine was. Not that she ever felt this, so long as she had Lancelot.

Elaine had not been at all well during the winter months that had just gone by, which was one of the reasons why Whitelands had been purchased, and why the family had migrated there somewhat suddenly.

The change from the confined life of town, with its noisy streets and heated atmosphere, to the country sights and sounds, was a perfect feast to the sensitive child, and it was no wonder that she felt no wish for companionship other than that of her cousin, and was quite indifferent and almost without curiosity about other children and the neighbours they might have here. They were too entirely town-bred to think of making friends with people simply because they lived near, and the chimneys of Redlands rising above the tree-tops aroused within them no curiosity. Lancelot had

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heard his father say that he intended to be very particular with whom he made friends here, and he cared very little whether or not he found companions of his own age and tastes. He had lived too much at home to have developed the wish for the society of other boys.

"Aunt Rebecca says that very few people have called, and that the place seems very stand-offish," remarked the boy presently. "I'm sure I don't care if it is. It will be fun to live all alone, and be like people on a desert island. There is an island just where the river forks, Ellie, where one stream that is almost red meets the one that is quite clean and white. I'll take you there one of these days when you can walk farther. Perhaps we might make an encampment for ourselves there. There is a nice boat on the river."

"Is there, Lancelot? Then I can play at being Elaine, and floating down to Camelot—for you know I'm sure that the Lady of Shalott and Elaine were the same—and you must be Lancelot in King Arthur's Hall. Only I think I'll not be dead, but only in a trance, and come alive when you call my name in terms of passionate endearment. That's what they always do in romances, you know, when they think people are dead. It is much nicer than sending for the doctor, and trying artificial respiration, which they seem to do now if ever they think anybody has been drowned, or anything like

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that. You won't do anything so silly for me, will you, Lancelot? You will bend over me tenderly and say——"

"Why, there's the dinner gong!" cried the boy, in so eager a fashion as rather to scandalise Elaine; but then Lancelot, although not dining late, was allowed to go down and sit at table, and have dessert with his father and aunt, which was counted a high privilege, and though Elaine never cared to do the same, she might have done so if she wished. "All right, Ellie; I'll say anything you like when we play the game, but I don't know if it would be very safe for you to go floating down the stream alone. You might run aground."

"The Lady of Shalott did not. She went right down to Camelot."

"Well, she was in a poem, you know; that makes a difference, I think; but we'll see presently. I must go now. I want to ask papa a lot of things. Won't you come, to-day, just for a change? Do!"

Elaine thought that for once she would. She was always dressed for the evening, whether she intended to appear downstairs or not, and in this sweet fresh air she was far less tired than she had usually been in town.

So hand in hand the pair went down the fine broad staircase that was such a source of pride and pleasure to both, and took their seats one on each side of the dining-table, whilst her father and aunt partook of a

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dinner in many courses, which was eaten without much conversation to enliven it. Elaine looked about at the finely-proportioned room, and wondered if it were or ever had been a baronial hall. She wished it was the fashion for gentlemen to wear something more picturesque than black broadcloth, and didn't know how people expected the standard of honour and chivalry to be kept up if they made themselves so commonplace and uninteresting; and when she came out of her reverie it was to hear Lancelot's father say testily,

"All the better, too. I don't mean to have anything to do with them, neighbours or not neighbours. If they are too stuck up to call on you, Rebecca, they may just stay away. I mean to get into the very best society the place has to offer—and in time I shall do it—although I am quite aware it will be a matter of time and of some difficulty perhaps. I don't at all care about being intimate with all the people round, simply because they live near. That's a stupid country-bred notion, and I never did mean to be guided by it."

At that moment a footman entered the room with a letter on a salver, which he handed in silence to his master. Mr. Leslie took it, broke the seal, and looked it through with a snort of anger and contempt.

"Pretty cool, that."

"What, papa?" asked Lancelot.

"Why, those Danverses of whom we have just been speaking demanding a right of way through our park.

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I like that, indeed! A pretty cool piece of impertinence, after the way they have chosen to ignore us. I'll soon let him know what I think of his demands. Why, I had the gap stopped on purpose to keep out his riffraff of a pack of noisy children from making a highway of the park."

"Did they?" asked Lancelot indignantly. "Why, what right had they to come into our property? We do not trespass in theirs."

"Right? Why, none at all, and I have put a stop to it, and will take care that there is no more trespass in that quarter again. I've no notion of such precious free and easy ways. If I find any of those youngsters disturbing my birds, or making their way through my fence, I'll have the law of them uncommonly quick—that I will. I don't care if they do call themselves neighbours and gentlefolk."

Mr. Leslie was a quick-tempered and irascible man, though he had not really an unkindly nature. He was also labouring under a misconception about the Danvers family, as his next words show.

"A low sort of speculator, that Danvers, not fit to shake hands with if one met him. I found out all about him in the City. He has a very shady reputation there. I do not intend to have anything to do with him whatever."

Now Mr. Leslie had heard a good deal against the character of a certain Mr. Danvers, and he was quite right, from his own point of view, in setting his face

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against any acquaintance with him; only it so happened that there had been a mistake, and the Mr. Danvers of whom he had heard a bad character, was not his neighbour at all, but quite a different man, who chanced to live at Red Hill in the next county. The confusion had been quite natural, only that a more cool-headed and less impetuous man might have taken pains to ascertain his facts more accurately before coming to a conclusion; but Mr. Leslie was always disposed to make up his mind very fast, and his irritation at the request made in his neighbour's letter was very great.

Lancelot fully shared his father's disdainful feelings, and Elaine was very much relieved to hear that no stranger children were to be allowed to come prowling about their park. She had a nervous horror of surprises of any kind, and as she knew nothing as to the extent of the ground around the house, she had an impression that these low-bred Danverses, if not kept out by force, would be for ever appearing and disappearing about the place, and that she and Lancelot would never be certain of being free of them.

"I am so glad papa will not let them come in and out," she said to Lancelot, as they went away together at last.

Elaine always called her uncle papa, having caught the name from her cousin years and years ago, and never having been checked in her use of it.

"Oh, of course he never would dream of such a

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thing, nobody but a cad would have thought of making such a demand. Fancy, our asking leave to make a highway through Redlands! I can't think what people are made of; but I suppose they know no better. These *nouveaux riches* have no sense of the rights of property, or of anything like that."

Lancelot spoke very grandly, as was rather his way; not that he was really stuck up, but rather because he and Elaine had got into the way of playing at being such exalted personages that they felt as though they had a right to look down on all the rest of the world with a pitying contempt. Children brought up too much alone often fall into some such fashion, though it does not go deep. A little friction from the outside world soon rubs it off, and they are none the worse for it in the end; but it sometimes makes them appear at first far more proud and exclusive than they really are. Lancelot and Elaine had a great contempt for the *nouveaux riches*, little knowing that they themselves were not unfrequently classed by their neighbours under this designation. They knew all about their long line of remote ancestors, and could tell tales by the yard of bygone Leslies who had distinguished themselves by flood and field. But they knew almost nothing of the avocations of their immediate forefathers, who had regained in trading the fortunes dissipated by fighting and hard living several generations ago; and, as been hinted before, they believed the century was in fault for the style of men it produced.

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They had no idea that their father had been obliged to associate with people who would hardly have passed muster even in these degenerate days. They had lived in their own world of dream and books, and now they were beginning a new life with an uncommonly small stock of experience or common-sense.

But they were very happy; and after all, what did they want with common-sense when they had such a romantic home to live in, and a deer-park all round it, and huge timber trees, and dells, and glades, and a river? It took Elaine nearly a whole week to master the lie of the land at all, and every day was full of new and delightful surprises.

Mr. Leslie and Miss Arkley had been at Whitelands some weeks before the children had come. They were left behind in London to finish a certain course of instruction under their masters, after which they were to have six months entire holiday, and only resume their studies after Michaelmas, when a tutor was to be engaged for Lancelot, and a French governess for Elaine. They were both studious children, rather too fond of their books if anything, and it was considered well to give them a space of entire rest from study. They certainly enjoyed the liberty accorded them in this wonderful new place, and wandered about hand in hand the whole day long, not even playing their accustomed games as yet, but laying the foundations, as it were, for future games, when the first edge of the wonderful romance and novelty should have worn off.

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Then in due course Sunday came round—the first Sunday in the new home; and the children for the first time were dressed to go outside the gates, and wondered much what they should see, and what the neighbours would be like—those neighbours with whom they were so anxious not to have too much to do.

"They will all be clodhoppers, you will see, Ellie," said Lancelot, with the fine intolerance of a town-bred boy. "The men will shamble, and mop their faces with red handkerchiefs, and the women will look as if they came out of the ark, and will all have poke bonnets and queer shawls. It won't be very amusing; but you know people in the country always are like that."

"The common people do you mean, Lancelot, or the ladies and gentlemen?"

"Oh, I believe they will all look very much alike. People don't see any fashions down in the country, and they just dress anyhow. Of course, if they have money they look a little less like guys; but they will be a precious set of frights, you will see."

Elaine's curiosity was naturally somewhat excited by the prospect of such an odd-looking congregation, and she and Lancelot started early for church, thinking they should like to watch the people come in. The walk was not long, and the way was quite easy to find. The church was built of flint, and was rather a fine building, and had a good peal of bells, which

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sounded very pretty chiming through the fresh spring air. The old sexton seemed to know by instinct who these fashionably-dressed children were, and with a show of respect that pleased them mightily, showed them into a large pew in the chancel, with no other in front save the low bench for half a dozen little choristers, and straight opposite was another similar pew, now empty, exactly the same size and shape as theirs.

As the bell changed a good many people began to drop in, mostly of the labouring or farmer class. The farmers' wives and daughters were many of them very nicely dressed, and seemed to have a very good notion as to the prevailing fashions of the day; but there were some curious specimens amongst the older people, whose appearance provoked a smile from the children, but soon they had forgotten everything else in the interest aroused by the arrival of their opposite neighbours in the chancel.

A little door in the wall opened quietly, and in filed six persons, who walked into the big pew with an evident air of proprietorship, and all knelt decorously for a few minutes before taking their seats.

First in the procession was a very nice-looking boy, a year or two older than Lancelot, with a face that Elaine thought most attractive, for it was both clever and kind, and very refined, although she was hardly of an age to understand how great an influence its

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refinement had upon its expression. Next to him was a brother who was very like him, perhaps rather handsomer, but not quite so attractive she thought; and then came a girl, and upon that girl Elaine's eyes were riveted quite eagerly, for she thought she had never seen anything before quite so pretty as her dress and her face. It really was almost, if not quite, mediæval, and really one could have fancied that its owner had lived a few centuries ago.

Madcap—for of course it was she—was one of those children whom the so-called artistic style of dress suits, and her mother took a pride and pleasure in making the quaint frocks in which her little daughter appeared.

To-day she wore a large hat of drawn silk, of a pale sea-green colour, and underneath the falling brim her ruddy gold mane of chestnut hair descended in its curly picturesque confusion. Her dress was of the same colour, only of French merino faced with silk, and it had great puffed sleeves, and a gathered body, and as it had been copied from an old picture, and copied very accurately too, it was no wonder it captivated Elaine's fancy. On her hands she wore tan gloves with deep gauntlets, and her waistband was fastened with an antique silver clasp, her only ornament. Elaine's gaze rested upon her with such intensity that it seemed to attract that of the other girl, and presently they found themselves looking full at each other with almost unrestrained curiosity.

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Now Elaine began all of a sudden to change her mind upon the subject of friends, and to think that it might be nice to know this family at least. They had all such nice faces, and they were evidently gentry through and through. She did not know exactly how the friendship was to be commenced, but she thought she might try what a smile would do. The girl opposite was very grave, and was looking straight at her as if she meant to stare her down, and so Elaine let her small white face relax into a smile, hoping to see an answering expression on that of the little girl opposite. But rather to her surprise, and a good deal to her discomfiture, the smile was not responded to in the least. On the contrary, the brown gipsy face opposite put on a look of haughty disdain and contempt. The girl turned her eyes resolutely away, and Elaine felt her face growing crimson with the humiliation of feeling that she had been snubbed for her forwardness.

It was a long time before she dared to look at that pew again, and then she ventured to scan from beneath her long eyelashes the other occupants, whom she had hitherto not noticed. There was a younger boy, not much like his brothers, and next to him a very sweet and gentle-looking lady—a lady dressed with a simple elegance that bespoke a very refined taste. Then at the end of the pew was a gentleman, tall and finely built, with a proud but very handsome face, and some white hairs around his temples, that helped to give

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him an air of distinction from the very marked contrast they presented to his dark moustache and the darkness of the rest of his hair.

"I wonder who they are," said Elaine, as she and Lancelot walked home together, and she found that he had been as much impressed as she by the looks of this family. "Lancelot, don't you think we might allow them to be our friends? They must live somewhere rather near to come to our church. I do think it might be rather nice just to have them for friends, and nobody else."

Lancelot thought so too. He had liked the looks of the boys, and had begun to feel that it would enhance the pleasure of living in a fine house if he could share his pursuits with other playmates than his fragile little cousin. Lancelot was by nature a manly boy, though his life had rendered him rather effeminate in some of his ways. He would like to know these boys, and the girl Elaine so much admired. It would be good for her to have a girl friend, and he was sure he should enjoy playing with nice boys if only he had the chance.

"Let's go to church again this afternoon, and see if we can scrape acquaintance somehow," he suggested; and Elaine, who thought it might be rather romantic to get to know them in this, an out-of-the-way kind of fashion, agreed willingly.

Fortune seemed to smile on them, for in the opposite pew that afternoon were the girl and two

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of her brothers—not the eldest one, and neither of the parents. What could be easier than to contrive an encounter in the churchyard, and perhaps swear an eternal friendship?

Elaine was greatly impressed by the fact that this family entered the church by a little private door in the chancel. They had no corresponding door on their side, owing to the presence of the organ and vestry. But they decided that they would go out by the same door as their opposite neighbours, and then they could not possibly miss them; and so it came to pass that at the conclusion of the service the five children all passed out together.

And then a very strange thing happened, for the pretty little girl who was just in front of Elaine turned round with a very flushed face, and said to her brother—

"We really must complain if strangers begin forcing themselves through our door. I call it most unmannerly. Nobody ever did such a thing before."

Elaine's face was crimson.

"I—I beg your pardon," she said humbly; "we did not know it was your door. Do you mind our using it sometimes?"

And then the stranger girl turned and looked at her with a contemptuous stare.

"I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance, madam, and I do not desire to have it; but all I can say is, that if you are so very conservative over

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your own rights, you will have to learn to observe those of other people."

The girl and her brothers walked off with their heads in the air, and the old sexton coming up at the moment said, in answer to the wondering child's question:

"Who be they? Why, they be the young lady and gentlemen from Redlands, Mr. and Madam Danvers' girl and boys; and rare nice young folks they be, too, with a pleasant word for everybody; real gentlefolks, as us poor folks knows well. There's not a family high or low as can hold a candle to the Danverses, that there isn't—not in these parts, leastways."

And the old man passed onwards to lock up the door, whilst Lancelot and Elaine stood still in the path, gazing at one another in dismayed silence.

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CHAPTER III.

ON THE ISLAND.

"THE little pert, stuck-up minx! How dared she have the face to speak to *us?*"

Madcap's face was scarlet, and she turned round to shake her fist vindictively at the two children who were in conversation with the old sexton at the church door. It was not a very pretty action, and if Elaine had seen it she might have been rather shocked; but it was characteristic of Madcap, who always "went the whole hog," as her brothers called it, and neither liked nor disliked in a half-hearted fashion.

"And using our door, too, as if they had the right to it!" cried Ben, who was equally indignant; "It 's just like the impudence of those low-bred upstarts, They haven't the least veneration for ancient usages or the rights of property. I heard papa say so himself. Well, you gave her a good snub any way, Madcap, and just serve her right, the little conceited donkey."

Edgar laughed; he was quite as angry as the younger

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ones about the loss of their old privilege, but he did not feel so hot against the pretty, golden-haired girl, though he thought the boy was rather a muff.

"After all, it wasn't their doing: they may not even know anything about it. Father might do a heap of things that we shouldn't know of. I daresay they would be on our side if they knew."

"Oh! would they?" answered Madcap, with her nose in the air. "Well, of course, you can go over to the enemy if you like, Edgar—I'm sure I don't care; but Ben and I would scorn such poltroonery—*we* have a little idea of what is due to the family honour."

"All right! we will leave the family honour in your hands; no doubt it will be amply taken care of. But I think I know who will be the first of this family to make up to the upstarts"; and with a wave of his hand he indicated first Madcap, and then Ben.

They would not condescend to argue with him—it was beneath their dignity to repudiate such a monstrous suggestion. They, of all people—they who had sworn an undying enmity to the whole house of Leslie! Well, time at least would exonerate them from any such gross charge of disloyalty.

Madcap and Ben soon left Edgar to follow his own devices, and plunged into the recesses of the beech wood, where they had a special haunt of their own, in which they were always free from molestation.

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It involved some little climbing, but Madcap was so agile that she did not even hurt her Sunday frock by mounting to the commodious fork in the big beech, and when seated she turned to Ben.

"Well, and what do you think of them now you've seen them?"

"Ninnies," was the concise reply.

"Awful ninnies," returned Madcap with emphasis. "I wouldn't play with such a boy as that, not for anything in the world. Did you see his hands? As white as the girl's almost, and she looked like a bit of seakale herself. Just a pair of silly affected little cockneys. I'm almost glad we have got a big feud with them. It would be disgusting having to know such creatures as that."

Ben nodded an assent. He was more grave and silent than was his wont, and Madcap suspected that something was brewing in his mind.

"Ben," she said eagerly, "have you got a plan?"

He nodded his head several times; a look of latent mischief was stealing into his eyes.

"Oh, Ben, you duck of a boy! What kind of a plan? a good one?

"First-rate."

"Tell me, do tell me, there's a duck."

"A drake, you should say," corrected Ben. "But, of course, I'll tell you, Madcap, though you mustn't let it out to Harry, or even to Edgar. We'll bombard them."

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Madcap looked puzzled, even whilst her face lighted with expectant pleasure.

"Bombard them, Ben? How can we? I don't understand."

"We'll fortify the island, and bombard their ships as they go up and down. They're certain to pass when they take to boating, as they will do if they are not perfect fools. We'll make a fort on the island, and fire at them as they go past. We'll soon show them that they are not going to have everything their own way. We'll keep them to their own wretched little ditch. They shan't be allowed to go on the big stream, where we shall be always meeting them. They are such ninnies that they will be scared to death by a little gunpowder. We'll have a jolly lark holding the river against them."

Madcap's eyes sparkled.

"Oh, Benjie, what a lovely idea! When did you think of it? But I don't quite know how we shall do it. How can we make fortifications? Do you know how?"

"Oh, that's easy enough. We must throw up an earth-work, and plant our cannon on the top. You know we need only fortify one side, because the other is our own private water; they can't come that way. We shall store our ammunition and arms in the hut Harry built for us, and keep our tools and things there, and when the earthwork is big enough to conceal us we shall lie down behind it,

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and I think we'll have our artillery behind it too, with holes to fire through, but we'll see about that later; and we shall have sharp-shooters too—that will be our pea-shooters, you know, and we can hit ever so far off with them—quite far enough to hit those boobies in their boat; and when they hear the bang and see the smoke, and feel our peas flying about, they will be in such a jolly funk they will never come again, you will see, and we shall have a fine revenge."

"Oh, Ben, it's lovely! it's enchanting! You are a delightful boy. But I don't know where the cannon are to come from."

"I do, though."

"Oh, Ben! where?"

"A fellow at school has a couple of little beauties that go off with gunpowder, and make the jolliest noise possible—almost as loud as a real cannon—at least, I should think so."

"But he won't give them to you, will he?"

"No, but he'll swop."

"What can you swop with him?"

"Our collection of birds' eggs. He's got the rage for that kind of thing on now." Ben spoke with the contempt of one who has been through the phase and despises it. "He's tired of his cannon. He says they won't let him fire them off any more at home, because their house is too small, and it disturbs the neighbours. They are jolly little brass guns, Madcap,

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on wheels, about a foot and a half high, and they make the jolliest bang too, and don't really hurt anything, but frighten nervous folks out of their senses. You'll swop the eggs for them, won't you? We can get plenty more when we choose."

"Oh, yes, the eggs may go," cried Madcap, who was dominated by the one desire for vengeance upon the enemy, though at another moment she might have been rather loth to part with their really very large and complete collection.

"We can swop it back again when he is tired of it, I daresay," said the practical Ben, who had been at school long enough to gauge the length of time a passing mania was likely to last. "Fellows who don't find the eggs themselves never care much for their collections. He only wants it now so much because Rogers has got one, and they always try to beat each other. You'll like the cannon when you see them, and with the Easter holidays just coming, we can have a jolly go at our fortifications. I want to get them up if we can before those blokes take to the river at all. Then they won't suspect a trap."

"But do you think they ever will dare to row down the river alone? They look as if they sat in band-boxes or under glass cases all day, and never did a thing for themselves."

"Oh, but the boy can row; Martin found that out from the under gardener there. They look so pasty and washed out because they've always lived in

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London; but you won't find them *quite* such fools as they look, according to Martin; for he says they are very fond of being out of doors, and can ride very well, and have talked a good deal about boating. One boat is quite new, a nice little light one that was sent from Richmond on purpose for them. I wasn't going to be such a fool as to swop the cannon unless I knew that we should have a chance of using them."

"We'll go to the island this very evening, when papa and mamma are at church," said Madcap. "I do so long to understand about the fortifications. And how soon can you bring home the guns?"

"Oh, any time I like. Naylor is in a great hurry for the eggs, but I wasn't going to seem to care much for his guns, because I want him to throw in a supply of gunpowder too. We might have some trouble in getting that, but he's promised now to let me have my tin sandwich-box full; so now we can swop any time."

It was well indeed for Madcap that the holidays were so near, for the fortifications upon the island engrossed her mind to the exclusion of all else, and unless she had had liberty in which to carry on the undertaking, her impatience of control and absorption of mind must have betrayed her half a dozen times a day.

As it was, it was taken for granted that she and Ben should spend their time together out of doors, and as it was the regular rule that the oldest frocks were to be

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"hacked out" in holiday times, the dirty state in which the young engineers returned day by day from their labours excited little comment. All the Danvers boys were something of engineers in their way, and Harry was constructing a regular tramway from the house to the farm, to facilitate the carriage of milk, hay, straw, and such-like things. He and Edgar were so much engrossed in this task that they knew less than usual about the younger pair, only glad that they kept out of the way and did not meddle in what did not concern them.

The island, which was the scene of so much engrossing labour, was a pretty little place, which had always been a favourite resort of the Danvers children. It was not exactly their father's property. Indeed, it was rather an open question to whom it did belong, for it lay in the midst of the stream just where the rivulet that ran through the Whitelands property joined the larger brook that ran through Redlands, and the stream itself formed the boundary between the two properties. The ownership of the island had never been discussed, for it was practically of no value whatever.

One large old willow crowned it, drooping into the water and casting a pleasant shade, and underneath its arching boughs Harry had built a log hut, which was a favourite resort of the children in warm weather, though the elder boys had almost ceased to care for the island, the space was so very confined.

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But Madcap and Ben delighted in it, and regarded it as a species of private property. The ground rather favoured their scheme of fortification, for it rose somewhat abruptly from the waters of the clear white stream that ran from the neighbouring grounds, whilst on their side the bank was more shelving, and landing was perfectly easy.

"They couldn't very well use the island, if they wished it ever so, without coming round our side," said Ben, when they had taken the first survey; "and when we've got our earth-works up, it would be almost impossible, even without the guns; but I don't suppose they would ever dream of such a thing as trying to land, and we'll give them such a scare with our cannon the first time they do go by that they won't be in a hurry to come again."

The little brass cannon had been duly "swopped" for the birds' eggs, and there had been a delightful trial of their powers, when Madcap herself had been almost alarmed by the harmless report that reverberated through the woods, and had clapped her hands in ecstacy to think of the effect it would have upon the white-faced boy and girl when it sounded quite unexpectedly almost in their ears. Certainly they would never dare to come down the stream again.

Diligently worked the two miners, with their heart in their toil, and as the island was not large, the bank they thought so needful for their plans was soon thrown up, and the cannon planted at the gaps which

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had been left for them. The mound was large enough to conceal the two children when lying down, whilst they had so arranged matters that they could see up stream for a certain distance, and would have due notice of the approach of the enemy. Indeed, they had finished their work and were ready to rout the foe long before there was any sign of their approach, and sometimes a dreadful thought would suggest itself, that the "ninnies," as they were commonly called, would never put in an appearance at all. But as the proverb says, "everything comes to those who can wait"; and so one bright April day, when the birds were singing and the air was laden with sweet scents and sounds, the two playmates, lying luxuriously in their home-made hammocks in the willow tree, heard a new sound which caused them to sit upright with glistening eyes, and then without a word to slip to the ground and drop noiselessly behind their mound.

"You are sure the guns are loaded, Ben?" whispered Madcap, and his answer was a nod.

"Leave them to me," he said, "and as soon as I've fired the first, send a shower of peas as fast as you can shoot them into the boat, and I'll do the same the moment I'm free. Don't let them see you, whatever you do. The mystery of it is half the battle."

Madcap nodded acquiescence. Her heart was beating too fast for many words. The plash of the oars which had first aroused their attention was growing

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louder, and there was the sound of voices mingling with it too; and she distinguished a little cry of delight.

"Oh, Lancelot—an island! What a sweet little place! Why did we not come here before? Oh, I do believe there is a hut on it! Do let us land and see. Why, we will take possession, and make a regular hiding-place for ourselves. Oh, isn't it lovely?"

Madcap and Ben heard every word, and the girl clenched her little white teeth and threw a look at Ben, the meaning of which was not to be mistaken. He answered it by one just as fierce and grim, and the next moment the echoes of the quiet woodland were aroused by two tremendous reports in quick succession, whilst a scream of terror from the boat was almost drowned, and in the momentary silence that followed could be heard the quick pelting of the hard peas with which the assailants were cannonading their adversaries. The boat was too much beneath the shelter of the embankment to be seen well, and the mischievous children believed by the quick plash of the oars that it was in full retreat, and were just about to set up a shout of triumph, when to their astonishment the sound suddenly ceased, there was a noise of scrambling footsteps and snapping twigs, and the white-faced boy they had seen in church suddenly sprang upon them, his face crimson, and his eyes blazing with passion—altogether so transfigured that they hardly knew him.

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"You cowards! you mean, cowardly hounds!" he cried, panting with fury, and hardly articulating his words so as to be understood. "If you wanted to fight, why did you not come and fight like men?—I am not afraid of you—instead of frightening out of her wits a timid, delicate little girl, whom a breath would blow away? Hiding behind a mound, too, so as to give nobody a chance of retaliating! But I'll be at you for all that. Will you take it standing, or shall I thrash you like a hound grovelling on the ground as you are?"

This was turning the tables with a vengeance. Madcap and Ben sprang to their feet, hardly knowing whether anger, astonishment, or shame was the foremost impulse. A stinging blow across Ben's shoulders, delivered by a switch in the new-comer's hand, made him spring upon his antagonist like a young fury; but Madcap caught the sound of an imploring cry from the boat, a cry of such terror that her better nature was stirred into activity.

"Lancelot, Lancelot, come back! Oh, don't go. They will kill you. Oh, don't leave me alone! I am so frightened, Lancelot!"

The boy did not hear. He was struggling with his antagonist, and despite Ben's sturdy resistance was getting considerably the better of him. Madcap only hesitated for a moment, and then sprang over the mound, and found herself close beside the terrified Elaine, who was sitting up in the boat, white and

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"The white-faced boy they had seen in church suddenly sprang upon them." *p.* 53.

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trembling, her great eyes dilated with horror, and every drop of blood driven from the delicate little face. Madcap had never seen any one so really frightened before, and in a moment she was beside the shivering child, holding her hands in a protecting clasp.

"Oh, don't look like that; it was only our silly play. We wanted to bombard your ships and drive them back; but I'd never have done it if I'd known how frightened you would have been. We never care what tricks we play one another, and it was such fun making fortifications and getting the cannon planted. They are only toy guns, you know, they only have gunpowder to make them go off, not anything that can hurt. All the rest was peas from our shooters. The boys! oh, never mind them. I think they will be all the better friends for fighting it out quietly together. Please say that you are better, and don't look so awfully white. It's only a sort of game. Don't you understand now?"

Elaine was just beginning to understand. She had not followed the rapid speech of her new companion; but she had recognised in her the picturesque child she had seen in the church, and even in the midst of her terror she felt a certain glow of pleasure to find herself addressed so cordially by one who had snubbed her so very decidedly at their first meeting. There was something reassuring in the warm clasp of Madcap's not too clean brown paws, and the thin

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white hands of the younger girl held them very fast, as if she liked to feel their strength and power.

"Was it only a game? Oh, I am so glad! Perhaps I was silly to be so frightened. But I cannot bear the noise of guns, and I was just thinking about historic times, and it seemed as if we had got into the middle of a battle, and I thought every moment that we should be killed. And when Lancelot jumped out of the boat and ran into the middle of it, I was, oh, so frightened! I was sure he would never come back alive. And then you came instead. And, oh I am so glad it is only a game. I should like to play with you; but I don't think I shall think it is quite as nice as I used to do to live in historic times, where people used really to shoot at one another so often."

Madcap laughed, forgetting all about the deadly feud in the enjoyment of a new companion to chatter to. There was something in Elaine's beauty and fragility that appealed to her, though she could not have said why. She was half ashamed of having frightened the tender little girl, and was willing to make amends by any reasonable means.

"Would you like to come and see our ramparts and the guns? I really think they are rather clever, and we could play at an attack and defence if the noise did not frighten you. It was such fun watching you come down the river, and then firing off the guns. I feel as if I knew exactly how the gunners used to feel when they saw the enemy approaching."

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"But why did you make us into enemies?" asked Elaine innocently; "it is so much nicer to be friends."

Madcap laughed again, and the colour deepened in her brown cheeks. She was wondering if it were not rather foolish to have taken such a liking all in a moment to the daughter of the rival house; but she did not feel that she could draw back after what she had said before, and after all, was there not a spice of romance and independence in a sort of clandestine friendship with these two strangers?

"Come along," she said, springing cleverly ashore and giving a hand to help Elaine out of the boat, "let's see if the boys have fought it out together. They'll be all the better for having had it out in peace. Oh! they are looking at the guns. I believe they're going to fire them off again. Would you like to go a little farther off? It makes a great noise, but it won't hurt."

Elaine was a little frightened, but she was too much fascinated by the spectacle to go away.

"Hold my hand," she said, "I'll try not to mind. I should like to be as brave as you."

Madcap held both her hands tight, and though Elaine did jump when the report rang out, she kept back any exclamation of fear, and the next moment, drawing a long breath, she said—

"Oh! now I do feel as if I were in a real romance. It is just like being shut up in a besieged castle."

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"Oh, Ellie, Ellie!" cried Lancelot, catching sight of her at this moment, and running up with flushed face and kindling eyes, "isn't this jolly? Isn't it like what we've always longed to play at? And Ben says he doesn't mind making friends, and will let me fire off his cannon sometimes. You don't mind, do you? You know you said you would like a friend, if it could only be one of the Danverses from Redlands."

Ellie blushed crimson, Madcap began to laugh, and the friendship began from that moment.

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CHAPTER IV.

THE SECRET ALLIANCE.

"IT must be a *deadly* secret," said Madcap, who was fond of strong expressions.

"Oh, I should like that," said Elaine, whose violet eyes were full of liquid brightness, whilst a little tinge of colour had stolen into her white cheek. "We've never had a real interesting secret of our own, though we've often tried to make one. It would be like Romeo and Juliet, don't you think?—at least what it might have been if it had happened when they were children."

Madcap's knowledge of Shakespeare was limited, and she said she did not know. She never cared for stuffy old people in books; but Elaine looked quite horror-struck at such an expression, and hastened to explain.

"Oh, but they weren't stuffy, they were most romantic. They were lovers, you know, only there was a feud between their houses, a *deadly* feud you

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know," copying Madcap's expression, "and they would never have been allowed to know one another—just like us. But they fell in love for all that, and used to meet and say the most romantic sort of things, and by-and-by they both died, because things got so complicated that each thought the other was dead, and killed themselves because they wouldn't survive the other."

Elaine's grammar became somewhat involved at this point, but Madcap was not critical.

"Oh, I know," she cried. "The boys did a scene out of it once when they had recitations at school, but I thought it all rather silly. We'll be much more sensible with our secret, and we won't bother ourselves with all that killing and speechifying. But it will be awful fun to be great, tremendous friends when everybody thinks us deadly enemies. When we meet, and there are other people there, we shall scowl at one another and pretend to hate each other like poison, and say the very rudest and most disagreeable things we can think of, and then all the time we shall know that it is all make-believe, and it *will* be such fun. And we can meet here or wherever we like, and have the jolliest games together. We all like playing games about adventures and dangers and battles, and the guns do make it all so real. Ben and I could not manage half so well alone, and you do make such a very nice queen to fight for. You think of such grown-up things to say. I call it all awful fun."

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Madcap and Elaine were seated under the willow tree with their arms entwined, after the fashion of little maidens who have just sworn an eternal friendship. It was only two hours since they had been bitter enemies, but that seemed entirely forgotten in the pleasure of the new friendship. The boys were paddling down the river together in the pretty light boat that Lancelot's father had given him, and in their own way they were making friends quite as fast as the little girls, though not quite in the same outspoken fashion.

"It will be much more romantic to be friends like this, than it would if our parents and relations knew one another," said Elaine, whose little head was stuffed full of all sorts of fanciful ideas, borrowed from the books she had fed upon ever since she could read. "In all the interesting books there are always feuds and secret lovers and things like that, and I've always longed for a real mystery and secret of our very own. I began to think they couldn't happen in this century, but here we are in the very middle of one. Oh, Madelaine, darling, you won't tell anybody in the world, will you?"

"Not I," answered Madcap, shaking her chestnut mane with tremendous energy. "Why, the boys would laugh so awfully that I never should have the face to let it out. We vowed we'd never, never speak a word to you, whatever happened, and I wouldn't have them know the truth, not for anything."

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"What made you think you should hate us?" asked Elaine with great interest.

"Why, don't you know, you cut off our way through the park—at least your uncle did—and that made us in an awful wax. Papa wrote and tried to explain, and got a very rude answer back. Yes, it was very rude, Elaine, and I think you ought to know, because friends always tell the truth to one another, and I couldn't tell a fashionable fib if I tried ever so."

But Elaine was not in the least offended. In some things she was wonderfully simple-minded.

"I dare say it was rude, dear, and made you very angry. You see, poor uncle has had great disadvantages. He never reads anything but the newspaper and useless things like that, and so he doesn't know how to be chivalrous and magnanimous. People who go to the City every day couldn't possibly be that; and till we came here he always went there, and so he does not understand the things he might have done if he had had more advantages. But he is very kind to us, and gives us everything he thinks we want, and I do love him very much, though I wish he was more like your papa to look at."

Madelaine was pleased by the comparison, and tried to be just.

"Well, papa says he has the right to shut us out of his park if he likes, but it makes us very angry, because when one is in a hurry it seems such a long way round, and in hot weather it is roasting all along

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the road. I expect I shall be angry again and again about it before the summer is over; but it shan't make any difference in *our* friendship, dear, because it was no fault of yours, I know."

Elaine's cheeks were rather hot.

"It wasn't exactly our fault, because papa did it before we knew anything about it; but when your papa's letter came, and we did hear, we were quite glad it had been done, for we thought it would be a tiresome thing to have other people coming into the park. But that was before we had seen you. Afterwards, when we had been to church, we were both sorry."

"Well, we needn't bother ourselves any more over that," said Madcap graciously. "It is rather a nuisance for us, but it can't be helped, and we have all the fun of a clandestine friendship, which we shouldn't have had if there had not been a sort of quarrel. It'll be no end of a lark to pretend to be at daggers drawn, when all the time we are great chums."

Madcap laughed heartily, and Elaine, though wishing her companion would express herself in rather less hopelessly modern language, was still quite of her opinion as to the charms of the unknown friendship; and when the boys came back it seemed that they too had been discussing the situation, and seeing what could be done.

"I'll have the gap opened again," said Lancelot, with something of the air of the Lord of the Manor. "I won't have my friends shut out like that."

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But Madcap shook her head doubtfully.

"I don't expect anyone would open it for you. Keepers always love to shut up paths and keep everything very tight. If you were to say anything, he'd go straight to your father: and you know what he'd say. And you'd most likely get into a row."

Lancelot mused a little, and saw some sense in this statement. He remembered what his father had said about the Danvers family, and was pretty sure he would adhere to his decision. The fact that the children had make friends secretly would have no weight at all with him, and indeed, might make him only the more angry. And then none of the four wished the secret divulged, at any rate for the present. One of the great charms of this day's adventure was the romantic halo of secrecy that was to encircle the newly-formed friendship. If access were to be obtained to the grounds of Whitelands, it must be by other means.

"I say, couldn't you make a raid, and tear down the furze and stuff, and force your own way in? asked Lancelot, struck with a sudden inspiration. But Ben shook his head.

"That would be no good. They would only build it up stronger than before, and we might get into a thundering big row too. Besides, our father has forbidden us to do anything of the kind, and we mustn't disobey him."

"But I want you to see our park, and there are

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such lovely places for playing in, and I may not always go in a boat; so that I might not see you for quite a long time if you can't get in somehow," said Elaine. "The island, of course, is neutral; but I want you to come to us. What are we to do?"

"I don't know, I 'm sure," said Ben. "Your hedges are much too good to force a way through, even if we had not been told to let them alone, and it would never do to go in by the gates. Why—the lodge keepers would see us like a shot, and tell somebody—and then there 'd be a fine shindy—you bet."

Elaine sighed plaintively.

"It's quite as difficult as Romeo and Juliet; and our house hasn't got any balcony, so it can't be done that way. We must think. Perhaps we shall hit on something. Don't they always say that 'Love will find out the way'?"

But Lancelot and Elaine had to be going. They were always expected in punctually to the luncheon at one o'clock, whilst the other pair in holiday time had leave to stay out if they liked till tea-time, when they were provided with cold meat in lieu of the lunch they had missed. They had brought sandwiches and cake with them, and would gladly have shared their meal with their new allies; but Elaine was sure they must go back, and hurried Lancelot away, saying that if they were late after being on the water, Aunt Rebecca would be so likely to hinder their going in the boat again.

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With many embraces, and promises for a meeting on the following morning, the pair from Whitelands got into their boat and rowed quietly away. As they made their way up the narrow stream they talked earnestly together, and compared notes as to their feeling for their new friends.

"I think Madelaine is lovely—if only she would let me call her Madelaine instead of Madcap; but she hates it so, and says she hardly knows what I mean. I think she would make a splendid heroine in a romance, for she isn't afraid of anything or anybody, and she does say such queer things, and laughs so much, and is so strong and so active I could look at her all day and never get tired. She is just the kind of friend I have always longed to have."

"And the little chap is great fun too. He's younger than me, but somehow I don't mind that a bit, and he's very strong too, and knows all about birds and nests and eggs, and even the flowers and things that grow on the river banks, though he says he doesn't care so much for them as for the live things. You see, Ellie, when one comes into the country straight from London, one does want a friend who can explain things to one. I call it awful fun to have found this island and these children. We can have no end of games with them."

"Yes, so we can—if only we can keep it secret. Lancelot," said the little girl suddenly, "you don't think it's wrong to have a secret, do you? You don't

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think we ought to tell papa or Aunt Rebecca about to-day?"

"No, I don't," answered the boy boldly, "for I'm sure papa would let us be friends if we teased him to. You know he is always saying that we have been too much shut up together; and though at first he might try and choose some other friends for us, he'd be certain to let us do as we liked in the long run. I'm sure the Danverses are very nice people by what everybody says, and quite suitable friends for us. Only it's rather nice having a secret about it, and it saves the bother of asking and having to beg and tease."

Elaine heaved a sigh of relief.

"I'm so glad you think so, Lancelot; for I did like it to be a secret—what Madelaine calls a *deadly* secret. It's so much more interesting; but I should not like to do what was wrong."

And both Lancelot and Elaine forgot to consider that feeling sure of gaining consent to their wishes from an indulgent father did not give them the right to act in defiance of his expressed wishes *without* first obtaining that consent. Children are rather too fond of arguing after this fashion, and taking law somewhat too much into their own hands, especially when they feel very strongly that there has been some misunderstanding, and that they are in the right in what they wish. But even when this may be the case, they should always remember that it is not for them to decide what ought or ought not to be done, without

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reference to those in authority. If they consult their parents, and take them into their confidence, it will be strange if things cannot be set right amongst them; but to begin a course of concealment, even where no harm is intended in the first place, is always a mistake. It is impossible to guess to what such a course may lead, and sometimes it becomes very hard to avoid real deceit and untruthfulness, though at first no such thing was ever dreamed of. And at best it may lead to a great deal of displeasure and pain when the disclosure is at last made, all of which might have been avoided by open and fearless dealing in the first place.

As for Madcap and Ben, they had perhaps even less excuse than the other two for their conduct, for they knew very well that their father would be greatly displeased at their commencing a clandestine acquaintance with the Whitelands children, whilst they knew also that if they had told the whole story to their gentle mother, she would most likely have done something to smooth matters down, and make the way plain for the children to know each other in the ordinary way. But the fact of the case was that nothing was farther from the wishes of both than for this adventure and its sequel to become known to the parents or elder brothers. Ben had a shrewd idea that his father would not approve of his guns, or the use he had made of them, and would be vexed at his bartering a really valuable collection of eggs for them; and as for the

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elder brothers, Edgar in particular, they would jeer and gibe not a little at this sudden change of front, and altogether there seemed every reason for keeping the secret with the utmost care.

Heedlessness and want of reflection had always been Madcap's failing, whilst Ben, from being younger, had got into the way of following her lead without considering particularly whither they were going. Neither of the pair troubled to think whether what they were doing was right. They thought it all great fun, and were eager to get as much entertainment out of the affair as they could. They went home in high spirits, and were only a little more boisterous than usual at tea-time on account of the secret which both were thinking of. Madcap sometimes went off into explosions of mirth at apparently nothing, whilst Ben would grin from ear to ear, and look sheepish if he met his mother's eye. But those two were always having their own small mysteries and bits of mischief together, and so not much heed was paid to these demonstrations.

"I can't imagine what has been going on somewhere down the stream," Harry remarked. "I've heard reports of a gun—only it seemed louder—several times this morning; but it seems odd, for nobody shoots much this time of the year, and it's too early for the young rooks. I suppose somebody must have been rabbiting. Some of the Whitelands people perhaps. Did you see anything of them, Ben?"

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"We saw that disgusting little snob of a boy and the pasty-faced girl in a boat," said Ben, with a curl of the lip. "But they weren't shooting rabbits. I guess they'd neither of them say boo to a goose at any price."

"The girl looks like an underdone wax doll," remarked Madcap, at which sally all the brothers laughed, whilst Mrs. Danvers interposed gently to say,

"Hush, Madcap; the poor little girl is very delicate, I believe, and you ought not to speak unkindly of her. And you must try to be courteous and polite if ever you happen to meet, even though you may not care to be friends. It does not do for near neighbours to be rude and disagreeable when they see one another; and though we do not think that Mr. Leslie has been very polite to us, yet that is no reason for our retaliating by being unkind or rude to his son, or his little niece."

Madcap looked up quickly, and asked,

"What makes you say all that just now, mamma? You look as if you had a special reason."

"Well, dear, perhaps I have. You know it is Mabel Knight's birthday next Monday, and you are all going to tea at the Rectory. Well, I do not think it unlikely that you will meet the two children from Whitelands there; and I should be very sorry for you to do anything that would make Mrs. Knight uncomfortable; and you know, Madcap, you have a bad habit of acting upon impulse, and not stopping to think what you say or do."

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Madcap's eyes sparkled merrily. She hardly heeded her mother's words in thinking what "awful fun" it would be to meet Elaine and pretend to be strangers. She had so often wanted a chance of acting a part. She always believed she had a special talent for doing so, and until now there had never been a chance. She longed for the next day to come, when she could find out if Elaine would really be there; and when the little friends met on the island next morning, they thought it would be quite charming to play the part of haughty young madams, who would not look at or speak to each other, and the only danger seemed to be that Madcap might suddenly go off into one of her explosions of laughter. However, they rehearsed and acted the scene many times over, making absurb curtsies to each other, and speaking to imaginary bystanders about one another in very high-flown and exaggerated language. Elaine easily fell into a game of make-believe. She and Lancelot were always playing games involving some kind of acting; but to Madcap it was not a game. It was solemn earnest, and she fully believed that this was the right style in which to behave at the Rectory the following Monday.

Monday came in due course, and the children who parted at noon on the island as bosom friends, were to meet again that afternoon as sworn foes. As Madcap entered Mrs. Knight's pretty drawing-room, and found herself in the midst of a gathering of

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children, most of whom she knew, she suddenly felt that the part she had set herself to play would be rather more difficult than she had anticipated. On the island it had been so easy to put on a sort of glassy stare, to pass Elaine by with a sweeping curtsey, and to say to somebody else close at hand: "I pray you, tell me who is that stranger with the yellow hair, tricked out in all that finery, and what does she here?" But here in the sunny drawing-room, with motherly Mrs. Knight bidding her and the boys a kindly welcome, she felt she should only make herself ridiculous, and she really felt quite at a loss how to act. She looked furtively across at Elaine, and met just the faintest little smile from the violet eyes; but Ellie looked quite at ease, having cast off her theatrical airs as naturally as possible as soon as she was brought into the presence of others. Elaine was accustomed to a double existence, one, the every-day life of reality, and the other, the one of her dreams and thoughts, and she could change from the one to the other quite easily; but the more practical and less imaginative Madcap did not understand how to do this, and felt horribly puzzled and uncomfortable when her hostess said,

"Come, my dear, I want to introduce you to your little neighbour at Whitelands. She is a stranger here, and some of the children are shy, but you can always find plenty to talk about."

Madcap could not refuse her hostess to her face,

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and, moreover, the spirit of mischief was working within her. She loved fun about all else, and now was the chance for having some. She did not pause to consider at whose expense she was taking it.

"Elaine," said Mrs. Knight, "I want you to know little Madelaine Danvers, whom most of us call by the disrespectful name of Madcap. You are near neighbours, you know, and I hope some day you will be friends."

Now Madcap had generally very pretty manners, even if they were at times somewhat boisterous, because she was not a bit shy or self-conscious, and was just her own self, as little girls should be when they are taken into company. What then was poor Mrs. Knight's dismay and astonishment when she turned round to draw Madcap forward, to see that young lady absolutely in the act of making a hideous grimace at the stranger, turning up her nose, pursing up her mouth, tossing her head and flouncing her skirt in the most unladylike manner, whilst instead of offering her hand or saying something pleasant, she remarked to the room at large, without looking at anybody in particular,

"Dear me! what a stuck-up, dressed-up doll. I wonder anybody can have such a thing in their rooms."

There was a moment's dead silence. Elaine's head was dropped so that some people thought she was crying, whilst Lancelot choked, and bolted out of the

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window, most likely, it was thought, in a towering passion.

Then Harry came forward with a burning face, and almost pushed his sister out of the way.

"For shame, Madcap!" he said in a low voice. "You deserve to be whipped, and sent to bed." And then he sat down by Elaine, and began to talk to her in the kindly, merry, and gentlemanly way which, boy as he was, came naturally to him in the presence of a girl, and presently she looked up at him with the sweetest smile in her earnest eyes, and whispered very softly—

"Please, you mustn't be angry with Madcap. Indeed, I quite understand. Please don't let her be scolded."

"I shall give her a piece of my mind, I know," said Harry; "I have no notion of having my sister behave like that. The little vixen!"

"Oh! but please don't. Indeed, you don't understand. I do, and I liked it. You will make me so unhappy if you are angry with her."

Harry was considerably mystified; but then he always did know that the ways of girls were beyond him, and he could not easily resist the appealing glance of those eyes. He laughed, and said he would let Madcap off the scolding that time, but he would take care it did not happen again.

"Oh! but I should like it to happen again," said this extraordinary child; "I do think it is so brave

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and clever of her. I should never have dared to do it myself. Oh! but I forgot—it's a secret," and she broke off so short, and looked so apprehensively at him, that he was more puzzled than ever; but at that moment he had not the faintest idea what she meant, and his blank face reassured her. She would have liked this nice, handsome grown-up boy to be in the secret too; but she knew she must not tell him without leave.

Madcap did not escape a severe lecture at home from her father when Edgar reported her behaviour in very graphic language. Of all things in the world, a breach of good manners towards his neighbour whom he disliked annoyed him above measure. Punctilious, courteous, and polished to all he met, Mr. Danvers would be more than ever so towards one whose acquaintance he had repudiated, if forced into juxtaposition with him; and though he now regretted that he had let his children join a gathering which included the pair from Whitelands, he made this no sort of excuse for Madcap's extraordinary behaviour, and would have obliged her to write a note of apology but for the fear that it might be taken as an attempt to bring about an acquaintance.

"It wasn't quite as nice as I'd hoped, playing at a feud, and being friends all the time," Madcap confessed to Elaine on her next visit to the island. "I got a tremendous rowing, but I don't much care. Only it might have been better for me if you would

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have been rude to me as well; but you never said a word."

"Oh! I'm so sorry—I'm afraid it seemed very mean, but I *couldn't* when the time came—I really couldn't. I'm not brave like you, and it seemed so different there. But you did it beautifully, Madcap; I did admire you so."

And so no breach of friendship came about, and the secret alliance grew and throve amazingly.

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CHAPTER V.

STOLEN PLEASURES.

THE island was very charming and delightful, but then it was uncommonly small, and it seemed as if its resources were soon exhausted. When the gunpowder was done—and as it was rather recklessly used at first it did not last long—the sham fights and midnight surprises at once become very tame, and neither Madcap nor Ben cared about the quieter games proposed by Elaine, and only once indulged her with her favourite representation of Elaine carried into King Arthur's hall and recognised there by Lancelot. The Danvers children were no readers of poetry, and could not be got to take an interest in the loves of the hapless maidens so dear to Elaine. Madcap declared them all "little geese,' or "awful mawks," whatever that might be, and as her abundant vitality and love of active exercise rather fascinated and stimulated her less daring little companion, Elaine presently began to come to the

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conclusion that possibly it was a little foolish to die of love, which had hitherto seemed the most romantic of all fates, and she awoke to a much more lively interest in the more robust pastimes of her new companions, which were both a revelation and delight to Lancelot.

And then it was that they found the inconveniences of their island. They were so dreadfully cramped there. Lots of delightful games, such as hide and seek, and chases after fugitives, and Robin Hood and his merry men, could not possibly be played to any advantage here, and yet the children were too much afraid of being seen in company to venture to go elsewhere.

"If only you could come home with us, what fun we could have!" Elaine often said with a sigh; but they all felt that such a thing was altogether out of the question, and could only look at one another and shake their heads.

"A secret alliance is very nice," said Madcap once, "and I do love for everybody to think we hate one another so; but it has its drawbacks, too. We could have much more fun if we weren't absolutely obliged to meet on neutral ground always—and it is such a tiny bit of neutral ground that we have—hardly worth calling a territory at all."

Matters were just at this rather unsatisfactory stage, when one day something very exciting happened. Madcap and Ben were early at the island, and were

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wondering what they could do to amuse themselves that they had not done a hundred times before, when the plash of sculls in the distance warned them of the approach of their comrades, and from the rapid pace at which Lancelot was propelling the boat, it seemed as if he had something exciting to tell them.

And when the skiff rounded the last bend they saw that Elaine was waving her handkerchief, as if in token of delight; there was a pink flush in her pale cheek, and she looked full of eagerness and excitement. They were sure something had happened.

"Such a jolly lark!" cried Lancelot, as he drove the skiff ashore. He had taken to a more boyish form of speech, since having been so much with Ben.

"Oh, so delightful!" cried Elaine. "Just what we were wanting. Madcap, dear, you must jump into the boat directly, and sit by me, and Ben and Lancelot will take us back. You are to come home with us to-day. We have quite decided that."

Ben and Madcap looked at each other and at their companions, and did not know what to make of such a proposition. Elaine saw their perplexity, and broke into her ringing laugh.

"Oh, don't be afraid; the secret has not been betrayed, and nobody shall know that you are there. Just listen a moment and hear what has happened. Papa got a letter last night from an old friend who has just come back from India, asking him to meet him at Brighton—and Aunt Rebecca, too, who is a great

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friend of his wife's—and stay at their hotel for a couple of nights, so that they might see them before they went off to Scotland, where all their relations live. And they decided to go at once, and they started this very morning, and will be away quite three nights, if not four; and the last thing papa said to us was that we were to enjoy ourselves as much as we could, and that we might ask any of our little friends to come and play with us in the house or garden. And they took Aunt Rebecca's maid away, and the butler, who is sometimes rather cross, so that there is nobody left who will interfere with us the least bit. And we can have such fun, and play such games. You will come, won't you, Madcap darling? I do so long to show you everything!"

Madcap's eyes were sparkling eagerly. She had an immense wish to see Whitelands and the beauties she had heard of there, and the thought of having the run of the gardens and the park was charming after the confinement of the island; but then, suppose anybody found them out and told their parents, whatever would they say? Brother and sister looked at one another, and Ben blurted out suddenly—

"But look here, it's all right for you, I daresay; you've got leave in a way to bring us, but we haven't got leave to come. And suppose your servants see us and tell, and our father hears about it, we shall perhaps get into a jolly big row."

Elaine's face fell. She had not thought of this

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difficulty, but she had an answer ready after a little pause for consideration.

"I think we could quite well manage that nobody should know who you are. We 'll row up first into the dark shrubbery where nobody comes, and then I 'll run indoors and bring you out one of my big gardening aprons and mushroom hats, and a big veil over it, which will disguise you, Madcap, and we can get something for Ben, too. Lancelot has a blouse which will make him look quite different, especially if he has a different cap to wear. The servants then, if they do see us playing about, will not know in the least who you are, and we will be very careful that they do not see you too close; we can easily manage that. Oh, Madcap, won't that do? I thought we were going to have such a delicious day!"

Madcap was fidgetting from one foot to the other, trying hard to silence the little voice in her heart that was warning her not to consent until she had run home and asked leave from her mother. She wanted above all things to go. She did not want to betray the delightful secret to anybody, and she was certain mother would bid them wait for the answer till father came home to be consulted, which would mean a whole day wasted, and a great probability that the friendship would be put a stop to at once. Oh, she could not risk that; it must be right to be friends with every one. Mother would be the first to say so, and to wish her children to be

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kind, and courteous, and obliging. Had she not got into trouble with both her parents for a breach of this very rule? So, without any very close examination of her arguments, lest she should find them in some way at fault, Madcap, with a reckless determination to enjoy herself at all costs, sprang suddenly into the boat, and throwing her arm around Elaine, cried gaily,

"Of course we will come, darling; we will have a delightful day. It's not our fault it has to be a secret; but I know it is always right to love everybody, and be good-natured, and not bear malice, and we *will* be friends, whatever the rest of the world may say."

And Madcap really for the moment felt quite uplifted, and inclined to glorify herself for being so magnanimous.

Ben was only too delighted to follow her example. He was quite as anxious for the expedition as his sister, but he, too, shared her feeling of doubt as to the propriety of taking such a step without permission; still he was wont to be led by Madcap, who was possessed of the stronger nature, and he was a boy who loved to be in mischief, and thought anything allowable if it were in the way of a "lark."

With a feeling that they were plunging into the midst of a wildly adventurous undertaking, the four children started forth from the shelter of the

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island, and soon found themselves paddling up the narrow stream that ran through the park at Whitelands.

The house had been so long empty, that the Danvers children hardly remembered the park at all. They had not been encouraged to row in the water there, as it was shallow and rapid, and less safe than their own stream, and everything had for them the charm of novelty.

"Here we are at the best hiding place," cried Lancelot at length, as they shot into the cool shade of a laurel shrubbery, flanked by stately pine trees. There is a capital summer-house close by where you shall stay till we can disguise you, and we can play splendid games about fugitives and spies, because you know you really will have to be rather careful how you show yourself, if we are to be quite safe of our secret."

The children disembarked, and reached the rustic summer-house in safety. It was a pretty place, and would afford them good shelter either from rain or from heat. Elaine, who was unwontedly excited, rushed off to the house for the "disguises," and certainly, when the guests were arrayed in these somewhat shapeless and unfamiliar garments, it would require a close inspection at close quarters to make out who the intruders were.

Elaine danced round Madcap in great delight.

"Oh, you do look so funny! You don't look a bit

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like yourself. I'm quite certain nobody would have the least idea who you were."

And that difficulty having been successfully got over, the children gave themselves over to enjoyment, and made the most of their long holiday.

Certainly Whitelands was a charming place for games of all kinds. The park was so varied—so different from that of Redlands, which was all grass land, level and open, with its fine timber alone to break the monotony. But here were all kinds of little dells and nooks and glades, unexpected and difficult to find, where one party could lie hidden safely away, whilst the other pair hunted about within earshot, without so much as catching sight of them. There was a little brook which fed the larger stream, which was so shallow that it could be easily waded across; and there was something delicious in the hottest hours of the day in paddling barefoot in the clear, bright water. And the midday meal, which was fetched by Lancelot and Elaine from the house, and eaten in the open air, was a very sumptuous affair in the eyes of the little guests, who were used to more homely fare; and altogether there was something so charming and romantic about the whole business, that the hours only fled too fast.

"You must see the house and our nurseries before you go," said Elaine, when the lengthening shadows began to tell of approaching evening. "We shall be quite safe at five o'clock, because the servants

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"We can play splendid games about fugitives and spies." *p.* 85

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will all be having tea, and we shall not see a soul. We will show you all over the house if you like. You would like to see it, wouldn't you, dear? It is so pretty and so funny, and I will give you some flowers from the conservatory if you like. I am allowed to pluck some of them if I want to."

Madcap was eager to see everything, and though she knew she ought to be going home now, she could not resist the pleasure of the expedition over the house. It was cleverly and successfully managed, and they did not meet a single soul all the time; but it was nearly six before they stood together at a little gate which led out upon the high-road not far from their own entrance lodge, and Madcap was wondering what mother would say, for they were generally in punctually for half-past five o'clock tea.

"We will have another lovely day to-morrow," said Elaine, as she affectionately kissed her little friend, and Madcap cordially agreed, for it is always the first step that is the hard one, and as that had been taken the rest seemed easy enough.

"My dear children, how late you are! how hungry you must be! What has kept you out so late?" was the mother's gentle greeting to the truant pair, as they made their appearance at last, after everybody else had finished. "Where have you been, my dears?"

The pair exchanged glances, and Madcap, whose

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face flushed hotly, though she was so sunburnt that it was hardly noticed, made answer hurriedly—

"Oh! we went to the island, mamma. We go there very often now. But we didn't mean to be so late."

And to herself she added—

"That's every word true—I wouldn't tell a lie for anything; but one isn't obliged to tell every single thing when one has a great secret on one's hands."

Mrs. Danvers asked no more questions. She never interfered much in holiday times with the children's amusements, and she trusted them entirely. So her answer was only a smile and a shake of the head.

"Try not to be so late again, dears. It keeps things about so long. And I don't think such long fasts are good for you. You do not seem to be as hungry as usual, and it is never good to get beyond eating."

Madcap was certainly finding it rather difficult to make away with the liberal helping of cold beef put before her, as she well might, seeing that she had had two excellent meals at Whitelands since leaving home in the morning; but she had to keep that to herself, and Ben, luckily, was a boy who could always eat, and he showed no signs of having had sustenance in the meanwhile.

"Where is Harry?" asked Madcap, suddenly.

"He went out to look for you. I wonder you did not meet him, for he said he thought you would be

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at the island, and that he should go down there and halloo for you to come back."

Madcap and Ben exchanged surreptitious glances, and then for the first time it struck them that they had done a very foolish thing in returning by land; for they had left their boat at the island, and if Harry or anybody found that out, questions might be asked that would be very awkward to answer. It had never occurred to them before that they ought to have got Lancelot to row them down, and then have taken their own boat home.

Madcap hesitated a few moments, and then said,

"Oh, we came home a different way. We left the boat there, and we did some wading and paddling. Won't Harry wonder where we have got to, when he finds the boat there, and not us?"

It was certainly well for Madcap that her brown cheeks hid the tell-tale colour that was always rising in them; and yet she kept saying to herself that every word she spoke was true, and that there was nothing to be ashamed of in what she said. Yet ashamed she certainly did feel, for she had never before had occasion to equivocate, and she found it very difficult to do it naturally.

"You must take care you do not get into danger or take cold," said Mrs. Danvers. "I would rather you did not play too many pranks of that kind until the weather is more to be relied upon. You look rather flushed, Madcap, and certainly you are not

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eating well. You do not feel as if you had taken a chill?"

"Oh, mamma, you know I never take anything like that! I am only red with the sun. It burns so on the water. Let's run and find Harry, now. I've done, and so has Ben."

Both the conspirators were glad to escape, and catching each other by the hand, they ran down the garden walk together, not looking at each other or speaking, because each felt a little ashamed, and did not want to confess it. As they reached the river they saw Harry in the boat, sculling it up, with his canoe in tow behind. He had evidently been down to fetch it up, when he had ascertained that the boat was there without the two children. When he saw them standing on the bank he gave a look of relief.

"Oh, there you are, you little truants! I was wondering what on earth had become of you. I thought mother would be in a stew if she knew the boat was over there without you. It looks odd, don't you think?"

And without waiting for an answer Harry drove the boat into the boat-house, and Madcap and Ben stood and waited for him to come out.

"We've been wading," cried the girl, as soon as she saw him. "We told mother, and she did not mind. It was such fun. Don't you like wading, too, Harry?"

For he was looking at her in a fashion she did not entirely understand; but then Harry was always so

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nice and so kind that no one was ever afraid of him, and his good-nature was always to be trusted. He would *never* do anything to get anybody else into a scrape. He would much sooner get into one himself —that had been Harry's character all his life.

"Not by the island, thank you," he said quietly. "Don't you know that where the two streams join, there is the deepest part of the whole river? I'd rather leave that kind of wading to bolder spirits than myself."

And without waiting for an answer Harry walked off, leaving his brother and sister to look at each other in silence, and wonder what he meant by his words and looks.

"Does he know?" asked Ben, in a whisper.

"He can't know—nobody does. He could only suspect—and I don't see what should put him on the right scent."

"I do," said Ben. "He knows that nobody has a boat on the river at this part, but us and the Leslies. We didn't come away in our boat, and as he knows we could not really have waded, he must know that they must have taken us off."

"Oh, Ben, what a bore! How stupid we have been! But you don't think he will tell?"

"No, I'm sure he won't. He'd much rather get into a row himself for keeping our secret, than blab about it, and get us into trouble. If it were Edgar, now, I'd not answer for him. He likes to show himself the good boy, but Harry—no, never."

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Madcap drew a sigh of relief.

"I hope he won't ask any questions. It is so hard to know what to say."

"Oh, trust him not to do that! Can't you see he is quite as anxious not to be told as we are not to tell him. He must suspect something, of course; but he'd rather not know—and then nobody can call him an accomplice, don't you see?"

"Well, I'd rather nobody had known anything; but one can always trust Harry. I wish we hadn't been so silly about the boat; but we must manage better next time."

"If we are to go often to Whitelands it may be difficult to manage without making people suspect us," said Ben, who had been thinking things over in his mind. "Don't you see, that if we often left our boat at the island, and went away, people might get to find it out and wonder; and if it got to father's ears we might have to tell all about it, and get into an awful row. And we can't take our boat up to Whitelands, because the stream's so shallow, and our boat is such an old tub. We really ought to have a way in by land —or we shall certainly be caught one of these days."

Madcap saw the force of this, and looked perplexed.

"There was the little gate we came out of to-day," said Ben.

"But that's kept locked, and Lancelot hasn't always got the key; and, besides, it's so near our lodge, people might see us going in and out, and you know papa

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said something about our using the gates and paths. If we do have a way at all, it must be a private way of our own."

Ben looked staggered at that.

"I don't see how that's possible, unless we have a gap in the hedge like there was before."

"Papa says we must not interfere with the hedges, and I don't think Lancelot may, either; the men would fill them up again."

"Then I suppose we must never go again, or hardly ever. We must use the island if we are to meet them at all."

Madcap shook out her mane, and looked anything but ready to adhere to this proposition. She had taken an immense liking to the dells and glades of Whitelands, and she and Elaine had laid many plans of how safely they could meet in its sylvan solitudes, even when her father and aunt were at home, if only some way of entrance could be contrived. And Madcap, who, when the boys were at school had a great deal of spare time on her hands, and was sometimes decidedly lonely, had been indulging bright dreams of what this new friendship might become. For, strange to say, she had taken a greater liking to the white-faced, fragile Elaine than to any of the other young companions in the surrounding families; and though, perhaps, the charms of secrecy had something to do with the matter, the pair, so strongly contrasting with one another in every way, had struck

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up an enthusiastic affection, and Madcap felt that half the zest of life would be gone if she could not frequently meet Elaine.

"I wish we could have a subterranean passage, as they used to in the old times," she said, swinging her foot about disconsolately, and looking up into the sky as if for inspiration. "Now if only Whitelands were a real old house like this, I dare say there would be one between them; but I'm afraid all those nice sort of things had gone out of fashion before it was built. I suppose we could not dig one ourselves? I would ask Harry, only I'm afraid he might suspect something if I did. You know they do make very long tunnels now, but I suppose it would be too hard hard work for us. People would find out, and it would take so long. Ben, what are you looking like that for? Do you mean that you have an idea? Oh, do tell me if you have! Is it about a tunnel?"

"Well, not quite a tunnel; at least, not like the one you are thinking about. We could never do that, of course. But I do think we may be able to manage something, after all; only we shall have to be very careful, and it may be too hard for us after all. There may be rock or something in the middle."

"The middle of what? Oh, do tell me, Ben!"

The pair jumped down upon the gravel path, and put their heads close together, as was their wont when plotting mischief.

"Madcap, you know that very high sand-bank, with

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gorse and furze and things growing on it, in the loneliest part of the lane between us and Whitelands?"

"Yes, yes, I know."

"Well, you know that was once a rabbit warren, till the rabbits got some disease, and all died; and it's perfectly riddled with holes and tunnels, only the gorse hides the entrances to them."

Madcap gave a little jump and scream of delight. She caught at the idea instantly.

"Oh, I know what you mean. You think we can scoop out a way through for ourselves, and the gorse will keep people from seeing the hole, or knowing anything about it. Oh, Ben, you are a delightful boy! It's quite a lovely idea. We'll tell Lancelot and Elaine to-morrow, and begin digging from their side. I daresay we could get through in a couple of days if we all worked hard. And then we shall have our own secret entrance, and can go in and out just as we choose."

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CHAPTER VI.

EXCAVATIONS.

IT was positively delightful work. Even Elaine found the fascination of scooping out the friable sand with a long Dutch hoe, which she found lighter to wield than the spades and shovels of her more energetic companions; and there was something so romantic about the thought of their secret tunnel, which was to smooth the way for any amount of clandestine meetings, that it enhanced the pleasure of the work itself, and incited the youthful labourers to untiring efforts.

The great bank of sand, through which they were boring their way, rose high along the side of the lane, which was the limit of the Whitelands property, and was crowned with a thick hedge of gorse, now in full bloom, whilst gorse and furze clothed its sides towards the lane, though on the opposite side there was little vegetation of any kind. Pine trees and common rhododendrons had been planted in a thick belt all

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along the inside of the sand-bank, and had grown in time into thick shrubberies. It was the loneliest part of Whitelands, and a capital place for any undertaking of the kind. Not a soul was likely to come near the young engineers from week's end to week's end, and if they could but accomplish the construction of their tunnel, and conceal the entrance from passers-by in the lane, they would be able to slip backwards and forwards at will, with ordinary care and circumspection; and already they had in prospect the construction of a regular Swiss Family Robinson hut amid the gnarled and twisted branches of a giant beech tree that stood only fifty yards away. If they could once have a leafy retreat of their own, high up amid its sheltering boughs, safe from the observation even of the eyes of a passing keeper—the only being likely to penetrate these solitudes—they felt they would be completely masters of the situation; and in a bank so riddled with holes as this one was, a somewhat larger hole than usual would never attract notice, even if any one did chance to skirt along beside it. Elaine with her hoe, went about cleverly enlarging the entrances of many of the rabbit holes along the bank, so that the entrance to their particular tunnel would be hardly likely to attract special notice. The rabbits had been good friends to the little excavators in honeycombing the bank, and they were continually coming across runs, which saved them a great deal of labour. Luckily for their patience, the bank was not very

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thick through, and at the close of the second day of hard work, Ben, who was foremost in the hole, gave a whoop of triumph, and declared that he saw light coming through from the opposite side.

This was most exciting news, and all the children had to scramble to the end to see for themselves; and then the two boys worked very cautiously at the outer hole, greatly rejoicing to find that they had brought their tunnel out at a place where a great bush of prickly gorse formed an excellent screen.

To be sure getting in and out would be rather prickly work, but the pair who would have most of this work to do cared little enough for that. They had done what they had planned, and had contrived what Elaine persisted in calling "a subterranean passage," and what could the heart of childhood desire more?

"We shall never have to disobey anybody now," cried Madcap, dancing about on one foot, "for nobody will ever think of telling us not to go in and out of our tunnel;" and whilst pluming herself on her obedience to the letter, Madcap forgot that there might be disobedience in the spirit, and never paused to consider that already she and her brother had transgressed a good deal in this respect, and intended to transgress much more.

"It must be right to be friends with one's neighbours," was the answer she always returned to her

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conscience, when it pricked her after the troublesome fashion of consciences when they are not listened to, and she forgot that the friendships of little people ought first to have the sanction of the parents, and that it cannot be right to conceal from them what they certainly have a claim to know.

"I do so enjoy a secret attachment," said Elaine many times during the course of the day spent together in the recesses of Whitelands park; "it is so much nicer than having little friends to come to tea in starched white frocks and company manners. I don't think the people here like us much, and I don't care at all particularly for them; but I love you better than anybody, except Lancelot, in all the world."

This was flattering to Madcap's feelings, and she answered frankly—

"And I like you better than any of my other friends—I think I like you better than Edgar; but of course I have to like Ben and Harry and father and mother better, because, you see, they are relations."

"Yes, of course. I think your brother Harry is such a nice boy. I should like to know him, too."

"Harry is very clever," said Madcap, with sisterly enthusiasm. "Papa thinks Edgar is cleverer, and Edgar is his favourite; but I think Harry is much cleverer, really, though he does not talk so much. He has just made such a lovely tramway from the

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house to the farm—he and Edgar together, but Harry did much the most. Oh, I wish I could show it to you. It is so clever, and it is *such* fun to get into one of the little trucks and be pushed along. It is cleverer, a great deal, than our tunnel, but then it had not to be kept a secret."

"Oh, how I should like to see it," cried Elaine, who had plenty of curiosity, and was growing bolder with the example of courage before her eyes in Madcap and her brother, who seemed to fear nothing. "I do like your brother Harry so much. He was so kind and nice the first day I ever spoke to him, and I watch him in church, and think what a nice face he has; and if ever he does meet us on the roads he takes off his hat so politely. I should like to see something he has made."

Madcap was as eager to show as Elaine could be to see.

"Well," she said, "I don't see why it shouldn't be managed somehow, when the boys have gone back to school and the house is very quiet, some day. Mamma has calls to pay some afternoons, and papa goes to the Temple most days. We might, perhaps, manage it."

"The Temple?" questioned Elaine wonderingly, "I thought your father was a City man—a stockbroker, or something of that kind."

"Oh, no; papa is a barrister, and wears a silk gown, which shows he is very clever, I believe. He has chambers in the Temple, and he goes there nearly

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every day. What made you think he was a stock-broker?"

"I heard papa say so once."

Madcap looked rather scornful.

"Oh, perhaps he was thinking of that other Danvers I have heard papa speak about, who is half a swindler, too. *He* isn't any relation of ours, thank goodness! If your uncle thinks he is, you had better undeceive him."

"I don't think I could without telling our secret, but I am very glad to know. I didn't think it could be your father—he has such a nice face, such a fine face. I wonder if we shall ever be real friends. Except for having our secret I should be very sorry about the feud."

"I don't think I mind much about that," answered Madcap, who did not reciprocate Elaine's wish for an acquaintance with the head of the house; it was quite enough for her to have Elaine for her secret friend. "But I should like to show you my home, and Harry's tram-line. You managed beautifully to show us your house; I don't see why I should not manage the other."

"It would be very nice if you could, especially on the days when Lancelot goes to classes at the school. Did I tell you he has asked papa if he may go to the drilling and the Latin and Greek at your brother's school, and papa has arranged that he shall, if he likes? So I shall have a good many days when I

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shall be alone. I am so looking forward to seeing as much as I can of you."

"I shall have lessons too. I shan't be able to come just when I like, as we do in holiday time; but mamma is very kind about lessons in summer, and makes them shorter and easier than in winter, and I may always get up early, if I like, and get on with them that way. And I do think that if it is only *you*, I could smuggle you in and take you to see the tram some afternoon when everybody is out. What fun it would be! The farm men would never take the least notice—they are nice, slow-witted men, who never notice anything we do; and if you lay down in the truck, and I put a little straw over you, I could take you right up to the house, and if nobody was about I might smuggle you up the back stairs to my nursery, and we might have a good game together if we only locked the door, and I hid you in the cupboard if anybody came. We have the most beautiful cupboards for hiding in up there, behind the panelling, where there are chinks to peep out through. You would not be in the dark if you were shut up there."

Elaine clasped her hands in silent ecstasy.

"Why, what is it?" asked Madcap.

"Oh," she answered, with a great sigh of satisfaction, "if ever I had one wish greater than another it was to see a panelled room, and to be hidden away there as a sort of fugitive."

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Madcap laughed, as she always did when Elaine breathed out such sentiments. She did not understand her companion's feelings. With her, these adventures were prompted rather by the love of mischief and of romance; but the pair generally found themselves wonderfully well in accord, and the prospective visit to Redlands was eagerly discussed. Ben did not see at all why it should not be made.

"I'd have it some Wednesday afternoon, when mother has her poor woman's clothing club in the mission room. She is always out till tea-time, and the house will be quite quiet. Nobody calls that afternoon, because she is out; and we could easily contrive that nurse should be out of the way. We might ask her to go out to do something for us—not that she would be cross, whatever we did, but she might tell mother, and there might be a row."

Madcap thought this an excellent idea, and Elaine was quite excited at the prospect. She had been rather depressed before at the thought of the closing holidays and the suspension of such regular intercourse, but this project quite cheered her up again. She had taken a little girl's romantic liking to the tall, gentlemanly boy whom she saw Sunday by Sunday in church, and secretly hoped that one day he, too, might be induced to join the secret alliance; but when she had hinted at this to Madcap, the girl had coloured up and said something not too coherent about "Harry's being no good—he had *ideas* about things, and was

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sometimes rather tiresome, though he was very kind, too;" and Elaine had said no more, though she had not fully understood her companion.

"If Harry were only here, he would tell us directly how to set about building a sort of house in that tree," said Madcap, looking up longingly into the temptingly arranged boughs. "He is so clever and so strong, and he can work so well with tools. I wonder if he would guess or suspect anything if I were to try and find out as much as I can without exactly telling him."

"You might try," said Lancelot eagerly; "I do think you might try. He looks much too kind to tell tales, even if he did suspect something."

"Oh, he wouldn't tell tales, but he might *say* things," answered Madcap—an expression better understood by her brother than the other pair. They both of them knew that Harry would never play the double game they were now playing, and though they were getting used to the little equivocations and deceptions they were often forced to practise, they sometimes had an uncomfortable sense that they might get into considerable disgrace if it were all found out.

But Madcap did her best to "pump" Harry, as she called it, her best time being when he was at work in the evenings in the workshop, deserted at that hour by the carpenter, where he was nearly always engaged in some kind of ingenious construction of his own. Mr. Danvers found it necessary to

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keep a regular carpenter upon the place, and his own sons had thus learned much more skilled use of tools than most lads of their age. Harry was something of a genius in such matters, and bid fair to develop into a first-rate engineer; and all the boys were clever and handy in different ways.

"I tell you what it is, Madcap," said Harry, stopping suddenly in his work and looking across at his little sister with a kindly, yet grave expression (it was on the third occasion when she had been trying to get information out of him as to the construction of a hut in the tree), "don't you think this sort of thing has gone on long enough? Don't you think you would be much happier if you made a clean breast of it to mother?"

Madcap flushed scarlet.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Harry."

Harry did not look at her. He turned up his shirt sleeves a little higher, and went on with his work, but he went on with his good advice also.

"Well, I expect you know a good deal better than I do; for I don't know anything, and suspicion is poor stuff to go on; but you are making everybody suspect that you have a tremendous big secret somewhere, and if you don't divulge it of your own accord sometime soon, people may chance to find it out for you—and perhaps you might not quite care about that."

The girl was silent, and perhaps a little dismayed;

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but she had a tolerable share of resolution and obstinacy, and she had no intention of being frightened into anything she did not like; and besides, was not to-morrow the day for Elaine's secret visit? And certainly nothing must interfere with that. So her face clouded over, rather as if a thunder shower were passing, and she said with some unnecessary heat—

"We have always been allowed to have our secrets. You have plenty of your own. I don't see why you need be so mighty particular all at once, and try and interfere with mine. You can just mind your own business for the future."

Madcap was rather fond of making sharp speeches when her blood was up, but Harry never retaliated.

"All right!" he said quietly, "I don't want to interfere, and I don't want to know anything; but don't you go and get into a way of thinking anything that is fun is all right, whether it is disobedience or not. It's a great pity, and it may get you into trouble afterwards."

But Madcap ran off without heeding. She was just in the mood to be saucy and defiant, and she thought Harry was "ridiculous for being so awfully strait-laced: one might as well be a grown-up frump at once."

But she said nothing to Elaine of Harry's warning, when she led her little friend next day through a quiet and seldom-trodden path to the farm yard, sleeping

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lazily in the hot sun of a May afternoon. The men were all out in the fields hoeing the wheat, and there was nothing stirring in the yard but the pigs and chickens dusting themselves, or basking in the glowing heat. Whitelands had no home-farm, and everything about the place was strange to the town-bred child. She gazed about her with the greatest curiosity, and her questions came in one unbroken stream.

Indeed, the cleverly-constructed tram-line running to the house was less interesting to her, than the cows and pigs and chickens and farm implements lying about. She had seen trams in town, she said, but not any of the other things. Still, as it was Harry's work, she examined and admired it, and was quite pleased to get into one of the trucks and be pushed up by Madcap to the house, lightly covered with straw. But just as they neared the back door something happened which quite upset their calculations, and for once in her life put Miss Madcap into a pretty fright. She heard a voice calling her name with some peremptoriness, and recognised the voice as her father's.

"It's papa!" she exclaimed in smothered tones. "Oh, Ellie, he must not find you here! Can you lie very still, covered up as you are, till I can get back? What could have made him come home at this time?"

"I'll be quite still. I'll never move," was the ready answer, and Madcap darted off in a great fright, only trusting that nobody would have occasion to go

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near the tram truck before she could return to release her captive.

Mr. Danvers was just inside the cool hall, out of the glare of the sun; he was looking pale and worn, and spoke sharply, as a man sometimes does do when suffering. Madcap saw directly what had brought him home; it was an attack of a very severe kind of headache to which he was subject in hot weather. She knew that when he was suffering from such an attack, rest and darkness were essential to him. Work of any kind was out of the question.

"Where is your mother? Where is old nurse?" he asked. "Why is every one out of the way together? I thought nurse was always to be found at home. What has come to call her away?"

"She went out to do something for us, papa," said Madcap, feeling wonderfully meek and submissive. "But I know where the stuff is that does your head good. I think I can make you comfortable if you will let me try."

Mr. Danvers did not look as if he had much confidence in Madcap's nursing capabilities; but he preferred her ministrations to those of any young maidservant, and was too much overcome with pain to argue the matter further. His study was close by and was one of the coolest rooms in the house, and Madcap speedily darkened it, and brought the lotion for his head, which generally relieved its throbbing. He did not speak, but submitted in silence

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to her manipulations, and all the while she was thinking of poor Elaine, lying half smothered with straw in the truck, and wondering how she could escape to her release, for her father might think it suspicious if she were to seem impatient to run away.

However, the risk must be run somehow, for milking time was drawing near, and then the truck would certainly be wanted to convey the pails to the dairy and, with a few words of muttered apology, and a promise of "being back directly," Madcap sped noiselessly away, and was immensely relieved to find the truck just where she had left it, and her patient little companion lying quite still inside it, so entering into the spirit of her concealment that she really had not been impatient or restless.

"I was making up the sort of speeches to say if anybody found me," she said, but Madcap had no thought to spare for game-playing. It was becoming serious earnest with her.

"Quick! quick!" she cried, "this way. I must hide you in the turret chamber, where nobody ever goes. It has nothing in it but some rubbish of Harry's, and the cupboard won't do, because I don't know when I shall be able to take you home, and the boys might have come in by that time, and they all go up there. The turret has a little staircase of its own out into the shrubbery. I could smuggle you out that way whenever the chance came. You don't mind being left alone again? I'll come back as soon as I can; but papa is

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ill, and I must stay with him till mamma comes home, or nurse. I'm so sorry, dear, but it all comes of our secret alliance. I hope you don't mind very much."

Elaine did not mind at all. She thought it all very interesting and absorbing; far more interesting than any ordinary visit could be, when she would have rung the front door bell and been shown into the drawing-room by a servant. And the little turret was quite charming. She could fancy herself anybody in the world up there; and, though it was rather hot, and there was only one chair to be seen, and that one had a broken back, she could play that she was a royal maiden in harsh captivity; and Elaine was always happy when indulging her own day-dreams.

A considerable time elapsed before any one came to her release, but she was wonderfully little impatient for a child; and presently the sound of footsteps on the little wooden stairs announced the return of her comrade. The door opened, and she sprang to her feet, to be confronted by no less a person than Harry himself.

For a moment the pair stood facing one another in mute astonishment, and the boy was the first to recover himself.

"I beg your pardon," he said instinctively; "I did not know that anybody was here."

"Please do not apologise," answered Elaine, with the air of a little princess, which sat, however, very

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becomingly upon her; "it is I who ought to apologise to you for my intrusion."

Harry was so much perplexed that he hardly knew what to say next, but he asked courteously,

"Can I do anything for you?"

"I should like to go home, if I could get away without being seen. It sounds a funny thing to say, does it not? but I have a particular reason for not wishing to be seen. Will you please not say anything to anybody about my having been here? I assure you I have done no harm; but I do not want my visit to be made known."

Harry hesitated a moment. He knew that Madcap was somehow at the bottom of this escapade, and he felt she was going far, and did not particularly wish to be mixed up in her mysteries; but generosity even to a fault, and an extreme disinclination to give pain or vexation to those about him, had been his characteristics from boyhood, and after a short pause he answered,

"I will keep your secret if I can possibly do so without falsehood, but I hope you will not think me a traitor if I should be obliged to answer a direct question. I could not tell an untruth."

The little maiden made a pretty assenting gesture with head and hand.

"Honour before everything," she answered gravely; "I would not have any one do anything the least dishonourable for my sake."

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"Thank you," answered Harry, relieved: "I will keep your secret if I can. I suppose I must not ask how you came here?"

His smile was very pleasant, and Elaine would gladly have told him everything; but feelings of loyalty towards Madcap held her back.

"I would rather say nothing, if you please; but I will, if I may, write a little line and leave it on the table here, and then, if you will conduct me out unseen, I shall be your debtor for ever."

Harry smiled again at these fine phrases, but the white-faced, fairy-like little creature fascinated him, and he was glad to do her bidding.

It was easy to reach the high-road from the turret-room without being seen, and he courteously insisted on accompanying her to her own gate, taking off his hat as he said good-bye in the way that seemed to her to suggest the grateful courtesy of a cavalier; and as she ran home across the park, she felt that the best of the day's adventure had been that last walk and talk with Harry.

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"The door opened, and she sprang to her feet, to be confronted by no less a person than Harry himself." *p.* 112.

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CHAPTER VII.

AN EXPLOSION.

"WHAT is the meaning of all this? I should very much like to know. A nice state of affairs, truly."

Mr. Danvers stepped across the threshold of the dining-room through one of the long windows which stood open to the garden, a letter in his hands, and a look of stern displeasure on his face, which made more than one of his children shake in their shoes.

The master of Redlands was not a man to be set at naught with impunity. Although a kind father, and in some ways an indulgent one, he was very insistant upon implicit obedience, and had trained his sons and daughter to heed his lightest word as law. There was nothing he so hated as disobedience in any form, and in the main he had been successful in his mode of training, although, with the high spirits and love of adventure inherent in his younger children, this had been a matter of some difficulty at first. But of late he had seen little to complain of

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with regard to his family. The boys were at school, and under constant discipline, and Madcap, though well deserving her name for her thoughtless heedlessness, had seldom offended in graver manners. There had been no real disturbance on the family horizon for a long time, and therefore the present stormy displeasure upon their father's face sent a distinct tremor through the room, and Mrs. Danvers looked round the table from her seat behind the urn, wondering what in the world was coming, and if Madcap could be in any way concerned in the matter, she looked so flushed and excited.

Madcap had been perplexing her mother for some time, now. She did her lessons with praiseworthy regularity and diligence; but when they were once done, the child always darted off, and was not to be found or heard of till the next meal time, when she would come in flushed and panting, only to dash off again the moment she was released.

Instead of delighting in driving out with her mother, as she used to do in the absence of the boys at school, she now seemed to find it tiresome, and, unless Mrs. Danvers really wished for her company, invariably decided to stay at home. That she had some secret amusement of her own the mother could not doubt, and she was glad to see her so happily employed at a season when she was wont to bemoan herself that it was so hard to be all alone. Mrs. Danvers had never insisted on knowing all the

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children did. They had many times before indulged some great secret, which, when revealed at last, showed how their time had been recently occupied, and the mother had no suspicion that anything was going on of which she or the father would not approve. She rather hoped the child would make a confidante of her in time, but she had refrained from asking any questions.

But now, when on this bright May morning, Mr. Danvers came in from the perusal of his letters in the garden with a thunder-cloud on his brow, and a look of stern displeasure on his face, she felt to the full as uncomfortable as the children, for she, too, stood somewhat in awe of her husband when his displeasure was thoroughly aroused, and she was afraid she had perhaps been unwise in allowing Madcap so much liberty.

"What is it?" she asked, trying to help over the crisis by her motherly tact. "I hope the children have been doing no harm. Has anybody been complaining of them?"

Mr. Danvers was looking steadily round the table.

"I should like to know, in the first place, if anybody here has any confession to make."

There was a dead silence. Madcap's heart was beating wildly. She almost longed to speak; but she was dreadfully afraid of her father in such a mood, and she hardly knew where to begin. She felt now that she had been doing wrong, and heartily wished

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that wrong undone; but she lacked courage to break that dreadful silence, and, after all, it was quite possible that he might not mean *that*. It seemed to her that his eyes were fixed full upon Harry. Most likely it was some silly row at school, and it would all be explained in a few moments. Harry never did anything really wrong. So Madcap sat silent, and Ben, taking his cue from her, was silent also.

Mr. Danvers' face grew sterner and darker as his question received no reply. He spoke once again in the low, distinct way that sounded very awful, because it always indicated the extreme of displeasure.

"Once more I repeat my question, Have any of you children anything to confess to me? Have any of you been engaged in a course of deception or wrong-doing? If so, you had better tell me so at once. I would rather hear your own confession willingly made, than have to get at it by cross-examination."

Again a dead silence. Madcap felt that Harry's eyes were turned for a moment upon her with a glance that looked both encouraging and imploring, but she would not meet it. She was frightened and bewildered both at once. Deceit was not natural to her, and she longed to speak, but she was frightened at the sudden way in which things had come upon her, if, indeed, they had come, and she did not know how to meet the crisis. If she could only have had her mother alone, she would have told everything; but her father in such a mood seemed to check every

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impulse of confidence, and wither up her words on her tongue. No, she would not say a word.

"Harry," said Mr. Danvers, in tones of deep vexation, "have you nothing to tell me?"

The boy was silent. He looked very uncomfortable, though not exactly guilty or shame-faced. Harry was always rather at a disadvantage before his father. He instinctively felt that he was sternly judged; that his brother was held in greater esteem than himself. Why it was so was one of those points which admit no explanation. There seemed no reason for the undoubted preference for the younger son which certainly existed in the father's mind; but it had been so since childhood. Harry had always been something of a scape goat in the family, suffering for misdeeds in which often he had had the least share, and held responsible for the misdemeanours of the younger ones, which he had really had no power to check. Although the eldest, he was but a year older than Edgar, and not so very much the senior of the younger pair, and it was hard that he should be held in a measure responsible for them: but somehow this had often happened, and he had never rebelled against the injustice, or let it make any difference in his affection for them; and it seemed as if the fate was still to follow him through the present crisis.

"Very well," said the father, with ever-gathering sternness, "since you will not speak I must, though

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I would gladly have left the confession to you. I have here a letter from our neighbour, Mr. Leslie, complaining, as it appears he has every right to complain, of the conduct of my family. He tells me that there has been some underhand play at work, that they have in some way or another contrived a way of entering his grounds, though all the gates are carefully locked, and certainly they do not pass the lodge-keepers' entrances. And yet some amongst them are constantly in Whitelands, and that there is a regular correspondence and communication between the two houses, he has fully established; though the only thing he can really discover on the subject is that his niece was, a few weeks ago, brought to the lodge by my eldest son, who took leave of her there in full sight of the lodge-keeper, and that they parted as if on the best of terms. As Mr. Leslie very truly says—though he might word his letter more courteously—if we had desired their acquaintance, we had only to take the ordinary methods for making it; but having tacitly repudiated it by never calling, and having already received an intimation that there was no right of way through the grounds of Whitelands for any inhabitant of Redlands, such conduct on the part of my household is simply inexcusable; and I entirely agree with Mr. Leslie in this. Now, Harry, it seems that you are at the bottom of this piece of gross impertinence and defiance. What have you got to say about it?"

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Harry sat silent. He was twisting his hands together under the table in the awkward fashion of boys; but what to say without implicating his sister he did not know; and it had always been his way to bear punishment and misrepresentation rather than get anybody else into disgrace.

"Speak, sir," thundered his father; "do you deny having been seen with Mr. Leslie's niece?"

"No, father."

"You did walk home with her one day?"

"Yes."

"And how and why was this?"

"I thought I ought to."

"Thought you ought to disobey your father's express commands?"

Harry was crimson, but said nothing.

Mr. Danvers was thoroughly exasperated.

"Will you tell me all you know of this business, or will you not?"

"I hardly know anything," answered Harry. "I did take Miss Elaine home, but that is the only time I have ever seen her to speak to, except at the tea-party at the Rectory."

"The only time you have seen her to speak to? But I hear there is constant intercourse beween Whitelands and Redlands."

"I do not know anything about that," said Harry in a low voice.

Mr. Danvers looked as if about to make some very

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cutting retort, when Madcap suddenly jumped up and ran across to her mother's side, from which vantage-ground she seemed able to speak with more courage and confidence.

"Oh, papa! please, papa, it isn't Harry's fault, it's ours, it's mine. Ben and I got to know Lancelot and Elaine on the island. You know our boats both went there, and we played together sometimes, and then they asked us to Whitelands, and one day we went, and then we went again; and it was so nice there that we made a hole through the bank to get in and out; and I go there often; but we only play in the park, right away from the house; and Elaine is such a dear little girl, and now that Lancelot goes to school she is almost as dull as I am, and so we did so want to play together, and it was so nice having a secret alliance. I didn't think about it's being naughty, at least not often, and we thought it so much more romantic for nobody to know—at least Ellie did. She is very romantic, you know, and so ——"

Now Mr. Danvers was a very stern man, but like other fathers who have several sons and only one daughter, he was always disposed to give a certain amount of indulgence to the girl, which would not be accorded to her brothers; and Madcap's eager burst of frankness, when once she had found courage to speak, impressed him favourably as compared with Harry's visible reluctance to speak. So that

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instead of looking more stern his face softened somewhat, though he shook his head, and said quietly—

"You are a sad harum-scarum, my dear, and you should never do anything of that kind without telling your mother all about it. If you had wished to make friends with the little girl it ought to have been done in a proper way; but you are too young to understand such matters, and perhaps did not know what a very awkward piece of business you were making for other people. I do not absolve you from blame, mind you; but I am willing to believe you led away by a child-love of a mystery and secret. And how much of all this did Harry know? Was he in your confidence?"

"Oh no," answered Madcap eagerly; "indeed, Harry knew nothing at all. And, papa, he would have told if it had been him, I know, because he advised me to tell. He told me we oughtn't to have such a secret."

Mr. Danvers turned sternly upon his eldest son.

"Then, sir, you did know something of what was going on?"

Now that Madcap had confessed her share, Harry was far less tongue-tied than before.

"I did not know anything; but I saw there was some mystery afloat, and I suggested to Madcap to have it out."

"You knew it had some connection with Whitelands?"

"I fancied so. I was not sure."

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"Why did you not ask your sister?"

Harry was silent.

"In point of fact, you did not wish to know? You were prepared to connive at the mischief instead of putting a stop to it. You knew what an annoyance anything of this kind would be to me, and you knew that I had bidden you be on your guard, and see that the younger ones infringed no rule, but you chose to close your ears and shut your eyes and let things go on unchecked. And this you call being a trustworthy eldest son."

"But, papa," cried Madcap, "Harry did not know. Don't scold him; it's Ben and me that ought to be scolded."

"Yes, Madcap, and you will not escape punishment for your disobedience. I am displeased with you both; but you were too young to understand quite what annoyance you were bringing on me. Harry did know, and he is therefore most to blame. And I should like to understand better what he means by saying he only *suspected* intimacy at Whitelands, when he is on such friendly terms with little Miss Elaine."

Madcap eagerly broke in with her explanation of that episode, but it did not turn her father's displeasure from Harry.

"After that had happened, you cannot pretend you did not know what was going on, and it was your duty to have informed me. I am very much hurt and disappointed in you. I had thought you had

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got over your childish weakness and indecision, and would have known how to act with proper regard for your position as the eldest of the family."

Harry said nothing. He never tried to defend himself, and at this moment a message was brought to the dining-room to the effect that Mr. Leslie was in the study, and would be very much obliged if Mr. Danvers would give him ten minutes' private conversation.

Mr. Danvers was very much surprised at such a message, following immediately on the receipt of the letter he held in his hands, which had been couched in anything but pleasant terms. He would have thought that a personal interview was about the last thing the master of Whitelands would have desired, and he certainly desired it little enough himself; but as he felt that his own children had probably been most to blame in recent occurrences, he would not deny himself to his neighbour at such a juncture.

"You had better come with me, Harry," he said, "and make your apologies, too. I consider that if you had had half the decision and courage that Edgar would have shown in similar circumstances, all this unpleasantness might have been averted."

Harry rose and followed his father without a word. He was quite prepared to take on his shoulders the lion's share of the blame. It hardly occurred to him that he was unjustly treated in being held responsible. He was always ready to help in the bearing of family

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burdens, and to take the brunt of the severity for his own share.

But the scene in the study was of a very different character from what had been expected. They had hardly got into the room at all before they were met by an outburst of cordiality from the master of Whitelands which quite took their breath away.

"My dear sir," exclaimed that gentleman, taking Mr. Danvers' hand and pressing it warmly in his own, "you cannot think how vexed and sorry I am about the misunderstanding which has divided us so long. I see you have my unlucky letter in your hand. Pray let me have the satisfaction of tearing it up, and making any apology in my power for my rudeness. Do you know I wrote that before I had had any talk at all with the children, when I had only heard a disquieting rumour from the men on the place, and was in a very different frame of mind, and a very improper one, as I fully admit. My dear sir, I trust that in the future you will give me the pleasure of calling you my friend. Only a few generations back, as I have discovered, our ancestors were closely connected both by marriage and by the friendship that belongs to brothers in arms in the same good cause." And here Mr. Leslie made a digression that was interesting enough to Mr. Danvers, as containing items of family history that would not however be amusing to young readers, and

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which plainly showed that there was a connection not unlike a distant relationship existing between the two families.

"Do you know," he continued, "I have been all this time under the delusion that you were that other Danvers, of whom I have heard only too much in my City life. It was only when I came to talk to the children—intending to rebuke them roundly for their share in this clandestine friendship—that I discovered the error under which I had been labouring. I hope and trust that you will understand and forgive my apparent discourtesy, and that you will let bygones be bygones. The young folks have shown their discrimination by allowing a natural affinity of disposition to have free play, and I need hardly say now that I shall esteem it a favour if you will resume all the old privileges connected with Whitelands, that I was discourteous enough to deny to the supposed speculator's family. I have given orders already that the gap shall be opened once more, and a gate fixed there, of which we will both keep a key, so as to prevent the entrance of poachers and tramps; and I will also show you the ingenious mode of egress and ingress our young people have jointly made between them, which does remarkable credit to their inventive powers and their perseverance. Come, may we not shake hands and forget all old ill-feeling? I take shame to myself for having commenced the difference. May I not have the

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satisfaction of feeling that the first step towards a long and neighbourly friendship is now taken?"

Well, Mr. Danvers was very much surprised, but though in his way a proud man, he was by no means a discourteous or vindictive one, and this frank apology and explanation quite disarmed him. He knew enough about his neighbour by this time to be aware that there was nothing whatever to be said against him, save that he and his immediate ancestors had made their money in trade, which was, under the circumstances of the case, rather creditable to them than otherwise: and the knowledge that there was a distant family connection between them was at once interesting and reassuring. It would have been impossible to draw back from the proffer of friendship, even had he been so disposed, as was certainly not the case.

Great was therefore the stupefaction of the party left behind in the dining-room, when in about ten minutes' time the master of the house reappeared, and with him their redoubtable neighbour, whom he led up to his wife, saying in a hearty friendly way—

"My dear, I want to introduce Mr. Leslie to you —our neighbour from Whitelands, who has discovered that we are cousins in a rather distant fashion. Have you a cup of coffee for him, after his early walk? He is good enough to overlook the liberties our audacious young people have taken, and to be willing that the

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friendship commenced so secretly should be carried on in broad daylight."

Mrs. Danvers was of course very much surprised, but she was also very glad that the storm had blown over, and she was also not a little pleased that the hostility with so near a neighbour should be a thing of the past. She had always rather blamed herself for having been so tardy in calling upon Miss Arkley, thinking that had a personal acquaintance been previously made, this difference about the right of way might have been avoided. In her graceful, tactful way she said something of this kind to the master of Whitelands, and received a very cordial response in the shape of a hope that they would all make up for lost time now; and then, turning to Madcap, who was staring at him open eyed in her astonishment and gratification, he said—

"And so this is the little girl who has so fascinated my niece that she can think and speak of nobody else? Well, my dear, I am sure I am very much obliged to you for lending her so many of your own pretty roses. I have been wondering what made the child so blooming all of a sudden, and now it seems that it is the pleasure in this new friendship, and that you are shaking her up out of her dreamy ways, and getting her to be more like an ordinary little girl. Lancelot never managed that—she was the leading spirit, and infected him with her own dreaminess and romantic fancies. He will get those knocked out of him at school fast enough, and if you will teach Ellie a little

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more childishness we shall get on very well. I wish you would one of these days share her lessons as well as her games, and then Lancelot could go to this capital school, where he is so happy with your brothers and boys of his own age. They were to have had a tutor this autumn, and have tried studying together; but it would be far better for him to become a real school-boy, and for Ellie to have a good governess, only the child gets so moped and white if she is much alone, that it seems cruel to try it for her. What do you say? Would you like to have lessons together?"

"I should very much, if I might: but I do lessons with mamma," answered Madcap, smiling fearlessly into Mr. Leslie's face, which was not at all forbidding now. "Please tell me, did you scold Ellie? I mean, did you scold her for having let us dig the tunnel? And how did you find out? Did you go through it yourself?"

"No thank you, my dear, I would rather be excused. It is better suited to little folks than to big ones. And I don't think Miss Ellie got half what she deserved for keeping a secret so long from her old uncle, of whom she has no reason to be afraid. But those two children have been brought up to think they can have everything their own way—and they take advantage in consequence. But you can go and ask her for a history of it all. I shall get into disgrace if I tell it all beforehand."

Madcap swallowed down her breakfast in a great

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hurry after that, and at a sign of assent from her mother, darted off to the tunnel, at the other end of which she found Elaine, eagerly awaiting her. The two little girls rushed into each other's arms and danced about, hugging each other wildly, and then Ellie burst out with her tale.

"Oh, isn't it all like a romance? I never did feel so like a heroine in a book as when papa called us down late last night—he was in really a towering passion" (Elaine dearly loved a fine phrase) "and we found that the keepers had been telling him that we had the Redlands children in to play with us, and that they must have a private way in of their own, because there were no gaps in the hedges, or anything like that, and they never came in at the gates. And oh, we did have such a thrilling scene! Lancelot, he stood up and said he would die before he would give up his friends, and I said that it was time all ill-feeling was buried in oblivion, and he said he would not have us know the children of a swindler, who had desolated thousands of happy homes—only he did not put it in such nice words—and I began to see what he meant (for I have heard them talk about that other Danvers before), and I said your papa was a barrister, and a gentleman anybody might be proud to know; and then Aunt Rebecca looked up from her knitting and said she thought we must have been making a mistake and that she believed *these* Danverses (that is you, you

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know) had been related to our family in by-gone days, when we were chieftains or warriors, or something like that, and had nothing to do with the City. And then papa looked quite different, and jumped up and got a lot of books out, and we stayed and watched and listened, and found out that he was dreadfully sorry he had made such a mistake, and didn't know what to do to make things better, because he had written an angry letter to your father without consulting anybody. But I told him how magnanimous he was sure to be, so he went off first thing to see him. And I ran down to wait for you, and oh, dearest Madcap, I am so pleased and excited. Do tell me every single thing that happened."

Madcap's story was more brief and bluntly told than Elaine's had been, but was equally satisfactory. At the close the little girl drew a long breath and said,—

"Oh I do call it altogether romantic and delightful —only I do hope your brother Harry will not be in disgrace for what was all our doing."

"I hope not," said Madcap gravely; "but papa was very vexed with him. He has a way of thinking that everything is Harry's fault."

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CHAPTER VIII.

THE SCAPE-GOAT.

"YES, it is all very jolly for us," said Madcap, with a little discontented grimace, followed by a laugh, "if only papa would not go on being vexed with Harry."

"With Harry?" repeated Elaine in surprise. "Why, how can anybody be vexed with him? He is so very kind, and polite and nice."

"Well, papa persists in being annoyed with him, and I call it a horrid shame," answered the candid Madcap. "I don't know how it is, but papa never does seem quite to understand Harry, and Harry never sticks up for himself, as the rest of us do. Edgar would take precious good care not to get into any rows for our sakes, but Harry does not seem able to keep out of them. *He* doesn't make any bother of it; to hear him talk one would think he deserved to be in a sort of disgrace, but I call it—beastly."

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Madcap hesitated just a second before bringing out her old favourite expression. Since she had been more with Elaine and less with the boys she had learnt to check some of her more outspoken phrases, as Elaine had a way of looking just a little taken aback by them, but the present subject was one that aroused her vexation, and seemed to demand strong expressions.

"But I don't understand," said Elaine, who had a great admiration for Harry, and was very much interested in anything connected with him. "What has he done?"

"Nothing," answered Madcap quickly. "All he did was not to betray our secret, when I had stupidly let it out to him, and he found you smuggled up in his turret room. Anybody with a bit of niceness about them would have done as he did—it's part of one's code of honour not to tell tales; but because Harry kept it to himself, papa goes on as if he had lost all confidence in him—and I call it a horrid shame."

Elaine drew her brows together in perplexity.

"But he isn't cross with you who did it, and he lets us be friends now. So why does he mind?"

"Oh, don't you see, from his point of view, as Harry calls it, that makes no difference—that came afterwards. When we had our secret and Harry found it out, he *did* mind our doing the things, getting into your park and all that, and he says Harry ought to

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have known it was very improper to have any underhand dealings like that, and ought either to have put a stop to it himself, or have told him or mamma what was going on. Harry, instead of being angry, and saying it was no business of his what the children were after, as Edgar would directly, listens to everything and says he is very sorry, but he did not like to interfere, and implies that he was really in the wrong all the time. That is Harry all over. I can't understand him a bit. I should get into a fine big wax if anybody came down on me so unjustly; but he is never angry."

"He is very noble," said Elaine, with sparkling eyes. "I think, if he had only lived in the times when people *could* be heroes, that he would be one."

Madcap laughed a little.

"I don't think Harry feels at all heroic just now; but what makes me so savage is that I believe Edgar is going to have everything his own way now, and that poor Harry will be left out of everything nice"; and Madcap kicked her foot impatiently backwards and forwards, as she sat in the ingeniously contrived hut in the big beech-tree, which had been constructed during the past weeks under Harry's careful supervision, and with his ready assistance.

"What do you mean?" asked Elaine wonderingly.

Madcap continued kicking her foot about, her usually sunny face clouded over with a frown of vexation and perplexity.

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"I don't know if it's proper to talk about family matters," she said after a pause, "but you're my friend, Elaine, and I think I have a right to speak to you and have my say. You see, it's like this with the two boys—the two elder ones, I mean—one of them is to go to Oxford, but papa cannot afford to send both, not even if they take scholarships, which probably either of them could do; for it costs a lot of money to keep young men at the University, and we are not rich, and papa does not get as much to do at the Bar as he used to do once. Things have been changing these last years, you know. I don't understand about it, but I hear them talking, and it has made things worse for barristers; and sometimes papa has been ill, and has had to let work go to other people; and so he often says he has to be careful and tells us not to have too grand ideas about the future.

"I call that very interesting," said Elaine, who was listening with all her ears. "It's much more interesting really than being so very rich. Go on, please."

"Well, it would be much nicer to be rich," said Madcap frankly; "at least, I think so. Now, it's always been settled that one of the boys goes to the University, and the other doesn't, and it was to depend upon who did best at school and seemed most fitted for it."

"And who does?"

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"Well, that's just what is rather hard to find out. You see, they are both such clever boys," said Madcap with sisterly pride. "Harry is certainly the cleverer 'all round,' as they say; but Edgar is the best classical scholar, and papa has been rather inclined to hint that his classics should be cultivated at Oxford, whilst Harry tries for something else more in the engineering line."

"And does Harry like that?"

"Harry would never complain, whatever was decided, but of course he wants to go to Oxford—anybody would. The worst of it is, that the one who does not go there will very likely have to go into a bank, and both the boys would hate that."

"But why would they have to do that?" asked Elaine.

"You see, it is like this: mamma has a rich cousin, who is very fond of her, and has no children of his own. He has a bank, and is very rich, and has always told her that if she will send one of her boys to him, he will give him a good start in life, and the chance of being a rich man some day. You know he wouldn't have to be a clerk, or anything quite like that, but it would be just the sort of work that Harry or Edgar would detest. Now, Ben says he should like to be a banker, but papa says that it's too good an offer to be passed on to the youngest in such an off-hand way, and that possibly, if Harry and Edgar had both been started in life, Cousin

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William would not care to wait for the chance of Ben's turning out clever. And since papa's headaches have been getting worse, and he has been told not to work at all hard, he seems more anxious than ever to settle something about the future of the boys; and I'm afraid every day that we shall hear that Edgar is to go to college and Harry to Cousin William."

"Oh, Madcap! why?"

"I don't quite know, except that Harry thinks so himself. He says papa is disappointed in him, and does not think him strong-minded enough for what he calls the temptations of Oxford life. I'm sure Harry is much *gooder* than Edgar, really; but papa always did think such a lot of Edgar; and then Harry, instead of sticking up for himself, and saying he's the eldest, and that he has done nothing to make them pass him over for Edgar, never says a thing, and seems to think it would be selfish to try and change papa's opinion, because Edgar wants it just as much as he does. I dare say it's very noble to be so unselfish as Harry, but I call it rather tiresome, too; especially when Edgar isn't a bit unselfish, and will take every single thing he can get."

Elaine's cheek had flushed with enthusiasm. Her admiration for Harry increased every moment.

"I think he is splendid!" she cried, clasping her hands together. "Oh, Madcap, I wish we could do something to reward him. Do you really think he

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will be sent to that horrid bank? I thought he was sure to be an engineer. He is so clever."

"He would like that, of course; but you know, engineering is not much of a profession just now, unless people go abroad, or to India, or somewhere far off; and mamma can't bear to think of Harry's doing that. And some day, of course, he will have Redlands, and it might be better for him to stay in the country. As papa once said to him—he told me about it himself—if he were ever to come into the family property he would never be able to keep it, unless he had some money of his own beyond what will be left him; that is one reason why papa seems to want him to go into the bank. He is more likely to become a rich man; but Harry does not care about that. He wants to build bridges and railways and all that kind of thing, but he will do exactly as he is told. I know he will. He will think it his duty, and nobody will know how he hates it really."

Elaine heaved a long sigh, partly of sympathy and partly of admiration. But Madcap had not got to the end of her grievances.

"And it is to be Edgar to go with papa on his walking tour when the summer holidays come. That has quite been settled since Harry got into disgrace. And I know exactly how it will be. Edgar will show off all he can, and make up to papa every way, and when they come back we shall find it is all settled. Edgar will be the one to read up for a scholarship at

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Oxford, and poor Harry will perhaps not go back to school at all, but will be packed off to Cousin William; and how we shall miss him from home!"

Elaine looked quite dismayed at the prospect.

"Oh, I shall be sorry if he goes; but Madcap, does he mind not going with your father?"

"Of course he minds; he is very fond of papa, and he likes seeing new places, and it was fair he should have the first turn. It never happened before, and perhaps it won't happen again; but he only says he hopes Edgar will have a jolly time. Nothing like that ever made Harry angry: I should be furious, if I were he."

Elaine was thinking deeply, but she did not speak; and Madcap, who could never be quiet long, slipped down from the tree and began to swing herself vigorously in the swing that had been put up for their benefit.

The summer holidays were near: plans for the spending of them were under discussion in many places, and the little girl began to weave a plan of her own, only she did not speak of it to her volatile companion, who was hardly to be trusted to keep a secret long.

Lancelot went to school almost every day, and though he did not attend every class, he spent a great part of his time there, and it had been quite decided that he should go regularly next term, though how far Elaine was to share her governess with Madcap had

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not been settled so definitely. The little girls were eager for the plan, but Mr. Danvers still held back somewhat from receiving such a benefit for his daughter, unless the cost were also shared, a point that Mr. Leslie was inclined to pooh-pooh as a mere detail.

Of course Lancelot found his first experiences at school rather trying. Although very well informed for his age, he had not learnt quite in the ordinary way, and was puzzled by a great many of the things he saw and heard. He took the boys' banter in good part enough, but he was more thin-skinned and sensitive than a school-boy would have been, and in all his perplexities he found a kind friend and champion in Harry Danvers.

Harry was not in the least afraid of being laughed at for taking the "greenhorn" under his protection. He helped Lancelot to master the difficulties of new ways, put him up to all kinds of things which enabled him to avoid drawing down ridicule upon himself, and helped him to meet the sallies of his schoolmates, and retaliate upon them with some success. Lancelot was exceedingly grateful for all this kindly good will, and appreciated it the more from the fact that it was so quietly and naturally given that it did not draw down public notice, or make him feel too much under the patronage of the elder boy. Harry had never patronised anybody in his life, and would certainly not have known how to begin. But he was very kind

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to Lancelot, and won the boy's undying gratitude in consequence.

Mr. Leslie, too, who was exceedingly fond of his son, heard with pleasure how well he got on, thanks to young Danvers' kindness, and he had several times turned over plans in his head for making some kind of return to the lad. Hitherto, however, nothing had occurred to him, and so he was quite pleased when one day, not long before the commencement of the holidays, Lancelot and Elaine came running to him with an eager request upon their lips.

"Oh, papa, we have thought of such a beautiful plan, if you will only listen to us."

"Well, my dears, I do not think you often have to complain that I will not do that."

"Oh no, you are very kind, and we do want it so much. Papa, didn't you say you were going to take Ellie and me for a fortnight into Wales very soon to see the mountains and lakes and pretty things there?"

"Why, yes, I thought you knew that it had been decided. Your aunt has a wish to visit some friends there, and whilst she is with them we will have a little ramble about the fine scenery on our own account. Don't you want to go, eh?"

"Oh, yes, papa, we want it very much. You know we are very fond of Wales—we have been there so often. But, please, we want to take Harry Danvers with us. He has never been there—he has hardly

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been anywhere away from home in his life—and Lancelot would enjoy it so much more if he had a boy with him. You know you don't care for scrambling walks, and I can't go long ones, because I get tired, and it would be so tiresome for Lancelot to have to stay with us, or else go alone; but if he had Harry, they could have such fun together, and he is such a nice boy."

"Why, so he is—a very fine, manly young fellow. I should like you, Lancelot, to take a leaf out of his book, and grow up just such another. Wherever you go you never hear anything but good of that boy. Why, of course I would take him and welcome, if you think his father would let him go. Are they not going away themselves, though?"

"Not Harry. Mr. Danvers is going, and Edgar; but poor Harry never gets any fun. Oh, do let us take him with us! It would make such a difference."

"Do you think he would like it? And could he be spared?"

"Oh, I think so for a little while, and I'm sure he would like it; anybody would. Do go and call on Mrs. Danvers and ask. I think she would be pleased. She is very fond of Harry, and I think she would coax Mr. Danvers over."

Mr. Leslie was quite pleased at the idea. He always liked to gratify any wish on the part of his son, and in this instance he was the more pleased

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at the form it had taken, from his wish to do something for Harry himself. He thought it a healthy sign that Lancelot desired boyish society. His contentment at being always with Elaine had been convenient hitherto, but had hardly been boy-like or natural. Like many another father in like case, he felt that two boys might be more easy to travel with than one.

The request was made to Mrs. Danvers without loss of time, and she was visibly pleased and gratified. Of course she was unable to give a decided answer without consulting her husband, but there seemed no reason to doubt that his consent would be given, and in due course an answer came that satisfied everybody.

Harry himself was greatly delighted. He had all a boy's natural love of travel and adventure. He liked Lancelot, felt a chivalrous sense of protection towards the fragile little girl, and had a shrewd idea that travelling in company with Mr. Leslie and his party would be a very amusing and rather luxurious affair.

Harry would have been equally happy to have roughed it at little inns, and carry his worldly goods on his back in a knapsack; still, there was a certain fascination and amusement in the prospect of staying at big hotels, and seeing the kind of life he had read about in books. He had never in the least resented the choice his father had made in selecting Edgar as

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his own companion; but certainly he was now reaping a very rich reward for his patience and good temper. Edgar was almost disposed to be the one to grumble, and wish that he had been left at home, that this piece of luck had fallen in his way; but Madcap, with sisterly frankness, informed him that he would never have been asked had he been ten times at home.

"You never troubled your head to be kind to Lancelot, or polite to Ellie when you met her. They don't care a straw about you. It's Harry who is always so nice. Everybody likes him."

"Ah, Harry is a clever dog—always knows which side his bread is buttered," was Edgar's not very happy response, which elicited some home truths from the fiery little sister; but in truth Edgar had little enough to complain of just now, and felt that his success in life was pretty well assured. He had always set his heart on being a University scholar, and from hints dropped by his father latterly, he had little doubt as to his ultimate success in being chosen for that sphere.

He and his father started off a day or two in advance of the Whitelands party, and Harry and Madcap had the pleasure of spending the best part of those days at the other house, helping the children there to arrange and pack up their treasures, and to assist in the selection of a new fishing-rod and tackle, which Lancelot said was quite a necessity in Wales.

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And it was not Lancelot alone who had to choose a new rod. Whilst the boys were eagerly turning over those sent from town for their inspection, weighing them in their hands, fitting them together, and finding fresh points to admire in each in turn, Mr. Leslie came into the room, and laying a hand on Harry's shoulder, said kindly,—

"And when you have helped Lancelot to choose his, you must get him to help you to choose yours, for I can't have any young gentleman of my party badly equipped. It would throw a shadow over us all, eh, Lancelot?"

Harry looked up, colouring warmly, and hardly knowing how to thank the kind giver; but Mr. Leslie wanted no thanks, and went away with a nod and a smile, whilst Lancelot and Elaine assured him that papa always gave presents in that off-hand way, and that Harry was not to be afraid of taking him at his word. And forthwith they plunged again into the choice of the fishing-rods, and could hardly believe their ears when the gong warned them that it was almost dinner-time.

The journey, when it came, was quite a revelation to Harry. Mr. Leslie was very wealthy, his little niece was very delicate, and both he and his sister liked travelling in seclusion and comfort. So, for the first time in his life, Harry found himself in all the luxury of a private saloon carriage, being whirled through the rich scenery of the West of England

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at express speed, without the least trouble or anxiety of any kind.

Lancelot and Elaine were used to it. Wales had been the native country of both their mothers, and whenever they did leave London they had generally gone there. As they neared the familiar places, they eagerly pointed out to their companion different hills and streams and other objects of interest. At the big hotel where they passed the first night they were very well known, and the best accommodation it possessed had been reserved for them. Ellie was too tired for the *table d' hôte*, but the boys enjoyed it mightily, and when Harry came up afterwards to tell her all about it, and describe the queer people he had seen, and the endless dishes that had come up, the little girl listened, quite delighted. She thought it so nice of Harry to think of coming to talk to her, instead of going straight out to look at the hills and the village, as Lancelot would certainly have done without him. But Harry had grown up to think of the younger ones as a matter of course, and it was only when Elaine had gone to bed that he let Lancelot carry him off to look at the beauty of the moonlight effects upon the hills, and listen to the brawling of the falling torrents.

They were delightful days that followed. Miss Arkley presently left the party for the house of her friends; and they moved on slowly from place to place, going just where they pleased, without any

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regular plan, and being favoured, for a wonder, with splendid weather, with hardly so much as a shower to interfere with any of their plans.

Excursions were arranged for almost every day, either in carriages, on foot, or on mountain ponies. And Harry was so kind and so clever and managing, that Elaine had never before been able to see so much, or enjoy herself with so little fatigue, as now when he was of the party. Lancelot was manlier and more boyish than his father had ever seen him before. The two lads spent their spare time in fishing or collecting botanical specimens for Elaine, who was very fond of such things; and they all profited by Harry's keen, observant eyes, and training in natural objects. He told them more about the wild birds and flowers, and even about the stones on the path, than they had ever known before, and was altogether so interesting, well-informed, and unassuming, that Mr. Leslie took an immense fancy to him, and formed serious plans for cementing the friendship between the boys, that was of such obvious advantage to Lancelot.

"We are to move on to-morrow, Harry," said Lancelot one day, after they had been some three nights at a small hotel in a pretty and secluded valley. "Look here, I've got such a capital idea. We're going to the place over there, right on the other side of that big mountain, if you call it a mountain, and I'm sure it looks big enough. Don't

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you think it would be jolly fun for us to walk by ourselves, and let the pater and Ellie drive round with the baggage; and then we'll go over the hill and meet them the other side? It would be a little bit of variety for us, and I've often wanted to climb this steep fellow; only it's such dull work alone, and nobody else cares for scrambling."

Of course Harry was eager for the adventure. The hill in question was steep enough to afford some fine scrambling, and it had the reputation, too, of being a little dangerous in places to those who were not acquainted with it. Lancelot, however, thought he was, for, although he had never been over the crest, he had ascended it almost to the top from both sides at different times in his life, and he had a good deal of confidence in his own powers of mountaineering, from the fact that he had once been in Switzerland, and had done one or two easy snow ascents from there.

So he laughed to scorn Harry's suggestion as to whether he could find his way without a guide, and having demonstrated to his father his perfect knowledge of the hill, and his ability to pioneer himself and his companion to the valley over the other side, the two boys went to bed early in great spirits, resolved to be off betimes, in order to avoid the heat of the day.

Lancelot had also another reason for desiring to be off before his father should be astir, for the consent

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extracted from him on the subject of this project was partly conditional upon the state of the weather next day, and the boy was afraid he would be "got hold of" by some stupid old fogey, who would spoil everything, so that his intention was to be up and away before his father was awake to interfere. And Harry agreed willingly to an early start, though he did not know with what motive Lancelot had so urged it upon him.

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CHAPTER IX.

ON THE HILLS.

"I THINK if I was you, sir, I would take a guide with you this morning," said the landlord of the hotel, in respectful tones.

Lancelot laughed gaily.

"Oh no, Morgans; why, a guide would spoil everything. Half the fun is going alone."

"Why, yes, sir, to be sure; but you won't find it so much fun if you get out of the right path, and can't find your way back again. There's many a party as has got lost for hours trying to cross the shoulder of Moel Cree. It's not as easy as it looks from here."

"Oh, I know all about it. I've been up from this side, and I've been up from the other, and I can certainly find my way across from one track to the other. You needn't be alarmed, Morgans. I know very well what I am about."

Mr. Leslie and his party always inspired great respect, and gained much attention wherever they

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went, on account of the liberal way in which it pleased him to travel. The landlord was evidently divided between his wish to please Lancelot and to discharge a duty to his conscience.

"Well, sir, that is as you please about the guide, of course. But I'd not like you to start unprepared. I don't quite like the look of the sky. I shouldn't wonder if we had thunder, and if that once comes, there is no saying that will happen. We might have deluges of rain that would quite blot out the landscape from you, or there might come down heavy clouds and shut you in up there; and it's only a very few of the oldest shepherds and best guides that can find their way about the hills when the clouds have come down. I'd really advise you to think a second time about going to-day. Hadn't you better wait at least till Mr. Leslie is down, and ask him what he thinks about it?"

But that was exactly what Lancelot did not wish to do. It is very hard when the sun is shining gloriously, and there is not a cloud to be seen in the sky, to believe in any break of the weather during the course of the next few hours, and Lancelot had all the courage of an inexperienced town boy, whose few mountaineering feats had given him an idea that he knew a great deal more upon the subject than he did. He was bent upon this climb, and certainly it seemed ridiculous to think of being lost upon that bright hill-side, almost every inch of which seemed visible, as it lay bathed in

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the morning sunlight. Lancelot was sufficiently used to his own way to be rather tenacious of it, and the elder and more thoughtful Harry was not present when this colloquy took place.

He came in just as the landlord had retired discomfited, and found Lancelot in great spirits.

"Make haste, old fellow!" cried the boy. "I want to be off as soon as possible. We shall have to make the best of the ascent before it gets very hot. It's a first-rate morning for a climb. I never saw the sky more clear. We shall get the most glorious views as we go. I wonder which will be at the other place first."

"It's just a little bit too clear, I think," said Harry, who, although a stranger to mountain districts, with their sudden changes, knew something of atmospheric effects: "I should not wonder if we had thunder before the day is out—though I don't think it will be just yet."

"A thunderstorm up in those hills would be awfully jolly," said Lancelot, who had a very vague idea what he was talking about, and Harry laughed.

"I daresay it would be very grand to see and hear, but if it poured with rain, we might not find it so awfully jolly—not that one is made of salt, but I expect it *can* rain here, when it has a mind. I think I'll take my mackintosh strapped over my shoulders, and I'd advise you to do the same."

But Lancelot had a great dislike to be burdened

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with anything at all, even carried in that unencumbering fashion.

"No, I thank you; I'd much rather get wet. I like to be free when I'm climbing."

So Harry was the only one of the pair at all provided against the weather, and, as he had something to carry, he added to it a supply of sandwiches and a flask of wine and water, to which proceeding Lancelot raised no objection. There was a cabin half-way, where some kind of refreshment could generally be procured; but it was quite possible they might miss it, and something in the way of a light luncheon was likely to come in acceptable.

"We shall be down at the other side in time for a good square meal of tea and eggs about five o'clock," he remarked, as they were starting; "and I've made a good solid breakfast. Still, it's just as well to have some kind of sustenance with us. What a jolly day you and I will have!"

And very jolly it was, as they both found, to be climbing the hillside in the clear morning air, leaving behind the close, shut-in valley, and feeling the air grow cooler and more buoyant as they rose higher and higher in their ascent.

"Just look at the hotel—why, it looks like a little card house," cried Lancelot, looking back and laughing; "it seems to me that we shall be at the top in no time. Why, we must have done half the distance already."

"It looks as if we had," agreed Harry; "but I've

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always heard that there's nothing so deceptive as climbing."

"Well, I don't know. I fancy we shall be at the top sooner than we fancy, and then it will be just child's play getting down the other side. What fun to be there the first. Papa thought he would be long before us, and they don't start till after an early lunch. I should quite like to meet him at the door, with my best bow. If the old landlord has been trying to frighten him with his precious thunderstorm, we shall have the best of the laugh."

"Did the landlord think it would thunder?" asked Harry. "I didn't hear him say anything."

"Oh, it was before you came down. But it's all bosh; nothing could be more splendid than this. I say, Harry, wouldn't you like to be a great traveller one of these days, and go about with me and explore new countries, like Livingstone? I think it would be awfully jolly; I should like nothing so well. Why shouldn't we do it? I believe papa would let me, if I really wished; and if you would go with me, I'm sure I should like it immensely."

Harry laughed, though there was a look in his face that was almost like one of longing.

"Like it? I should think so. I can't imagine anything much more jolly than opening up a new country —exploring it first, and then laying down its railways, and canals, and roads—or, at least, doing the surveying for it. I've always longed to be that kind of engineer;

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but I don't suppose I ever shall be." And Harry broke off short, with something like a sigh.

"But why not? Isn't it always best for a man to follow his own natural bent? I'm sure I've heard people say so again and again, and it stands to reason, too."

"Ah, but when one is one of a family, and money is not too plentiful, there are a lot of things to think of. I don't know that I quite understand myself, and it's not the sort of thing to talk about to other people, you know; but I don't much think I shall get the chance to choose my own profession, and it's always best to do as one's parents wish, and try to make the best of it."

But Lancelot did not see that at all. Harry was always a good step in advance of him in everything, but he certainly thought he was carrying submission too far.

"I don't think any fellow ought to have his career spoiled for him just for a caprice."

Harry laughed, as he often did when Lancelot put on that grand manner of his.

"My career cannot be said to have begun yet, so it is a little premature to talk of spoiling it. Look here, Lancelot, my boy. It is all very well for you, the only child of a very wealthy father, to talk big about what you are going to do; but things are different at my house, and there are the younger ones to think of; and if I can help the family best by taking to the kind of

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work I don't particularly fancy, why, I know perfectly well I ought to do it, and not to grumble. I believe one is always really happier in doing one's duty, than in going one's own way just because it seems pleasanter at the moment."

Harry spoke very quietly and naturally—not at all in a lecturing or hectoring way. Lancelot was silent for a moment, and then he broke out again; for, whatever Harry might do, he himself was very reluctant to give up his own way.

"But look here, Harry; if I want to do this, and if I can't do it without a companion, why shouldn't you be that companion? You know my father thinks no end of you, at least he does so whether you know it or not. He has often given me a bit of a lecture on trying to imitate you, saying you are just the kind of boy he should like for a son. You know he likes us to be called cousins, and makes the very most of the kinship between us, distant as it is; and that's all because he has taken such a fancy to you. Well, if I want to travel, I must have a jolly companion and friend with me; and there's nobody in the world I should like half so well as you. Why shouldn't we arrange to go to college together first, and then to go off and explore the world? Of course my father would pay everything, and we could have such a jolly time, and get as much fame, perhaps, as other travellers have done before us. You could let Edgar have Redlands and settle down to be a country squire, since your father is

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so fond of him, and you could belong to us, and have your home at Whitelands. I'm sure we should be very comfortable there when we get too old to travel; and I don't mean to marry anybody but Ellie, and she would be delighted for you to live with us. Indeed, I'm not sure, that it wouldn't be better for you to marry her, and me to live with you. I don't care so very much for girls and women myself, and I believe she will end by liking you the best."

Harry, who had a good deal more knowledge of the world for his age than the unpractical Lancelot, could ouly laugh at this wild plan for the future, but still it it did very well to talk about as they pursued their upward way. Harry knew quite well that it was but an airy castle, still it was pleasant to talk of travels, even with little hope of ever realizing the dream; and it was in very good spirits that the two lads scrambled at last over the rough stones and boulders that formed the summit of the hill, and looked proudly round them as they really gained the highest point and saw the wide expanse of hill and valley around them, and the range after range of rocky and heathery mountain stretching away into the blue distance.

"Well," said Harry, drawing a long breath, "we have been talking of travel, but I don't know whether we could easily beat a view like this, if we went to the ends of the earth for it."

But Lancelot was a little contemptuous. He was rather proud of the little travelling he had done, and

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told Harry that until he had seen snow mountains he had better shut up, and not betray his ignorance.

Harry took the retort in excellent part, and as both boys were a little breathless with their climb, they sat down to rest and enjoy themselves, and to discuss a part of the provision they had brought.

Harry suggested wandering leisurely down the other side of the hill, when they had done this, but Lancelot declared they would be at the hotel ages too soon if they did, and he felt like enjoying himself up there some time longer. Harry gave way as usual, feeling no need for hurry, and Lancelot, stretching himself along the ground, was soon fast asleep—he had the knack of sleeping at any available moment—whilst Harry set off searching for any rare botanical specimens these heights might have to offer, as an addition to Elaine's collection.

Thus engaged time slipped away quickly, and he had wandered farther than he knew, when he was recalled to a sense of their position by a sudden darkening of the brilliant sunshine, and the sound of a low and distant mutter of thunder.

Starting up and looking keenly round him, Harry saw at once a great change in the appearance of the sky. Great banks of black and red cloud had gathered there, and the sullen muttering became almost continuous, though a great part of the sound might be nothing but an echo from the hills round. Still, there was enough in what he saw to convince him that no

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time was to be lost in getting down to the shelter of the valley, and back he raced to Lancelot, who was still sleeping peacefully on his rocky couch.

"Wake up, old fellow, and show me the path down. The storm is coming after all, and the clouds look uncommonly threatening. I declare! that was a good flash, and just listen to the thunder; it would awaken the Seven Sleepers. Make haste and take your bearings, old fellow, for the sooner we are out of this the better."

Harry was not exactly frightened, but he did wish that the great rolling masses of cloud had been above and not below them. They came surging up as if from the valley below, and quite altered the aspect of everything. It had been easy enough, half an hour ago, to see the tree-tops of the very village to which they were going, but now nothing was visible that way, and how to direct their steps safely was something of a puzzle to him, though he still trusted to Lancelot's knowledge of the ground.

Lancelot was amused and admiring rather than alarmed.

"Why, how grand and jolly it is! I never saw clouds down below one's feet like that. Oh yes, I can find my way right enough, Harry; we have only to keep steadily in that direction. You've got a compass, and we shall hit a sort of wide sheep-track very soon. Shall we get right into the cloud soon? How jolly that will be! It will be like one of our dear old

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London fogs, that country people so abuse; but I rather like one, and I never got out of my bearings in one yet. Oh, I'll pilot you safe down, never fear. I'm not a bit afraid."

But Lancelot was soon to find that steering his way down a hillside in a thick wet cloud was a very different thing from walking the London pavements in even blacker darkness. Harry kept his compass in his hand, and consulted it constantly, and hoped they were going right; but it was exceedingly perplexing, with the swirling wreaths of cloud about them, and the intense flashes of lightning that played around their steps did not make it less confusing.

"It's awfully grand, though," said Lancelot, who was not alive to any possibility of real peril for them. "What an adventure it will be for Ellie to hear about! I wouldn't have missed it for anything. I like variety above everything, and as we had sunshine to come up in, it's awfully jolly coming down in a cloud."

Harry tried to think the same, and failed. He had read more and was more thoughtful than his companion, and saw that they were exceedingly likely to miss their way; and although he did not know what the dangers of Moel Cree were, he had heard it spoken of as a dangerous mountain on more than one occasion.

"Hurrah! here we are at the track!" cried Lancelot presently, as their feet reached a sort of path that felt different from the close slippery turf they had been treading before. "Now I know exactly where we are.

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I came up as far as here once before, and it's quite an easy descent with the path all the way to guide us. I do believe you have been a bit frightened, Harry; but of course you never were on a mountain before, so perhaps it was natural; but I knew I could get us down all safe. I hope you are satisfied now?"

"I don't think I am quite," answered Harry. "Look, Lance, this path of yours does not goes in the least in the right direction. We ought to be bearing due north-west, and that path turns very decidedly to the east. I doubt if it can be the right one."

"Oh, but I am certain it is. You don't understand these things, Harry. A mountain path is not like a country road; it goes winding and zig-zagging about all over; it can't keep to a straight line, like a street or road. I do assure you it is all right. You can put up that compass of yours now: I'll undertake to guide you safe down now."

Harry was very reluctant to be led away, but Lancelot's confidence was so great that he consented at last to try the path. He felt as if in part responsible for his companion, though as a matter of fact Lancelot was really the leader and the originator of the plan. He knew that the boy was not specially robust, and was very glad he had brought the mackintosh, which he insisted on his companion's wearing, as the moisture of the atmosphere through which they were now passing was very much like small rain.

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Lancelot remonstrated a little at taking the garment, but Harry insisted, and he certainly felt the comfort of keeping his clothes dry. The path, though he still stoutly protested it was the right one, was not at all satisfactory in character. Indeed, it hardly seemed to be a path at all soon, and the ground grew so rough for walking that both boys had made slips, and only saved themselves from falling by the help of their sticks.

"It has got rougher than when I was here last," Lancelot confessed, and Harry, stopping short, said very decidedly,—

"I am almost certain this cannot be the path at all. Don't you think, Lance, we'd better leave it altogether, and work back by the compass? I think I still have a vague notion of our bearings, and if we keep to them, and still go on descending, I believe we must come out of this horrid cloud not so very far away from our destination. But now I'm convinced we're going quite wrong."

But Lancelot was a little nettled. He had not Harry's intuitive perception of locality, and had it firmly impressed on his mind that they were at least going in the right direction. He was getting a little tired, though he would not have confessed it, and fatigue, almost more than anything else, makes us disposed to be irritable and overbearing.

"I tell you we are all right enough," he said fretfully; "if you will only not bother so I shall take you straight to the place. I have been here before,

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and you haven't. Surely you can trust me not to be such an ass as to go in a wrong direction."

"I don't think any one would be an ass for being puzzled in such a cloud as this," was the good-tempered reply. "I will do just as you wish, Lancelot; perhaps you do know best. Halloa! where are you? Lance, what is it?"

For just at that moment there had been a curious sound of slipping and falling. Lance, who had been some ten or twelve paces in advance, and only just visible in the fog, now vanished suddenly and rapidly, with a quick, sharp cry, and Harry, pressing cautiously on, found that the path they had been following led direct to a sort of rude quarry, whence slate and shale had been blasted, and that Lancelot had fallen over the ridge of one of the great holes, and must now be lying at the bottom. For a moment the boy's heart seemed to stand still, and then, to his immense relief, a muffled cry came up from below.

"Take care how you come, but come quickly. It's not a precipice, only a very steep bank of shale; only I didn't see what was coming, and pitched head over heels down. If you plant your feet carefully you can slide down without hurting yourself; only make haste."

There was a sound of suffering in the voice, that made Harry hasten to the rescue as fast as possible. It was as Lancelot had said. The bank of loose slate and shale was very steep, but not precipitous, and if he

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"He had tripped and fallen, and, unable to recover himself, had gone rolling over and over." *p.* 167.

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had not stumbled over the ridge and fallen, he might have glissaded down, as Harry now did, without injury. But he had been walking in a very unguarded fashion, and his momentary anger had made him hasty and careless in his movements. He had tripped and fallen, and, unable to recover himself, had gone rolling over and over, with the heavy slates and blocks of stone he dislodged tumbling after him; and now he lay at the bottom, half buried in the *débris*, his ankle hurt, and his shoulder seemingly sprained, every bit of breath knocked out of him, and utterly unable to move.

A nice predicament truly to be in, in such a place, and in such a storm! For the thunder, which had hitherto been growling and muttering rather round and in the distance than near at hand, seemed to be rolling up once more, and the blue lightning was growing every moment more vivid and intense.

Harry stood for a moment aghast; but his was the character that rises to an emergency, and he never stood by helpless and useless when energy and decision were required. He saw at a glance that Lancelot could neither move nor think any more, and that upon him devolved the whole task of getting them both out of the dangerous predicament in which they found themselves landed. He looked keenly about him, walking a few steps away, and then returned to Lancelot.

"Lance," he said, very clearly and decisively, "if you had to meet with a mishap, you might have

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done so in a worse place. There is a little bit of a shanty not fifty paces away, which I suppose the quarry men used, and I am going to make what kind of a couch I can for you there, and get you into it, and then I must leave you to find help somewhere."

Lancelot made no reply, being indeed spent and exhausted, and afraid of being betrayed into the weakness of tears if he attempted a reply; and Harry, hastening off, had the good fortune to light upon a quantity of dried brake fern and peat, with which the men had probably lighted their fires when they were at work in the quarry. It was not dry enough to ignite, even if Harry had had matches; but he managed with its aid to contrive a fairly comfortable couch for his companion to lie upon during his absence; and when once that task was accomplished he returned to the injured boy, and, with a mixture of gentleness and firmness remarkable in a lad of his age, he coaxed and assisted him to make the effort to gain the hut. After great difficulty—for Lancelot was too worn out and weary to be brave—he got him safely laid down there, and covered him up with as much of the dried fern as still remained, for he was shivering with cold; and though the mackintosh had kept his clothes from wet, the dampnes of the atmosphere seemed to penetrate everywhere.

"He must have what is left of the wine and the

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sandwiches," said Harry; and with great tenderness he fed him with bread soaked in wine till the disposition to eat had returned, and the boy partook of some of the much-needed refreshment, and felt just a trifle better.

As for Harry, it never occurred to him to taste the food, although only his great anxiety prevented him from feeling hunger. He reasoned that help might be hours in coming to the hut, and so left every bit and sup within reach of his companion, never pausing to consider how badly he might need sustenance himself in the difficult task that lay before him. When all his preparations were complete, he bent over the now drowsy Lancelot to say—

"Look here, old fellow, I 'm going off for help now, and I hope to send it very soon; but in any case, when we don't turn up, and they see what the storm has been here, we shall be looked for, and they will be sure to come to all the huts on the mountain, as we might have taken refuge there. You will certainly be found before night; and if by chance I 'm not, give my love to them all—you understand. But I expect I shall be all right too. You have some wine and sandwiches to take still: and do you feel pretty comfortable?"

"Yes, pretty well, if I were not so cold," was the faint response.

Harry hesitated one moment, and then took off his coat and wrapped it warmly about his companion. It

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was damp, but the dry fern and the mackintosh would keep the damp from penetrating.

"I shall run all the better without it," he said, half aloud. "That is better, old fellow?"

"Much better, thank you. I think I shall go to sleep now;" and indeed Lancelot was almost asleep, or he would not have permitted Harry to go out into the storm thus unprotected. But the languor of exhaustion was weighing down his eyelids, and before he had energy to raise them once more Harry had closed the door behind him, and was out on the hillside in the midst of the thunder and the rain.

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CHAPTER X.

THE RESCUE.

ELAINE and her uncle spent a quiet morning in the hotel which Harry and Lancelot had left early in the day, and neither of them felt any uneasiness about the two boys, who had started forth upon their long climb at daybreak.

"A capital day for it, except for the heat," remarked Mr. Leslie once or twice, looking up at the brilliant blue of the sky; "but youngsters never seem to feel that as we do—at least, not boys. And Lance will play no pranks now that he has such a steady companion. I like that boy Harry immensely, Ellie. There is something very uncommon about him, though I do not know exactly what it is."

Elaine was always pleased when Harry was praised, being very fond of him herself; fond, with just the tinge of shy admiration which makes the best fascination for a childish mind. Harry seemed very much older than herself—almost a young man,

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and was gradually growing to be a hero of romantic little Ellie's. She listened thoughtfully to what her uncle said, and then made one of her quaint old-fashioned speeches.

"I sometimes think it is because he is so unselfish that he seems different from other boys. You know when we are young it seems natural to think a great deal about ourselves—what we like and what we are; but I do not think Harry ever does. He is always thinking about other people."

Mr. Leslie looked at the child in some surprise, and then laughed.

"Well, my dear, I am not sure but what you have hit the right nail on the head; but it's not many children of your age that would have seen it all so clearly."

"Perhaps I think more than the children who can run about and play more," said Elaine sedately; and her uncle was inclined to think she might be right. Since circumstances had thrown those two more together just lately, he had often been surprised to find how companionable the little girl could make herself; and she was finding that her uncle was what she termed to herself "much nicer now she understood him," than she had hitherto thought him.

When he had had his business to think of he had noticed the children but little, and had not troubled himself to converse with them; but now,

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when his mind was freer, he often did so, and was proving himself a far less commonplace individual than the child had always believed him to be. This was in itself a great satisfaction to her.

"Oh, papa," she exclaimed suddenly, as the pair sat at their early lunch, "do look at that black cloud sailing along far below the blue. Does it not look funny?"

Mr. Leslie looked, and then rose from his seat, so as to have a better view up the valley.

"I'm afraid there is a thunder-storm brewing," he said. "We must hurry our departure, my dear, or we may be hindered from going; and it would never do to let the boys get there whilst we were detained over here. I will order the carriage at once. Your things are all ready, are they not?"

"Yes, papa—quite ready. But—but—you do not think the thunder will hurt the boys, do you?"

"I hope they will see the storm coming, and be sensible and get down as fast as they can from the top of the hill. If there is heavy rain they may get a ducking; but that will not matter much if only they do not get lost in cloudland up there."

Mr Leslie hastened away to give the orders for instant departure, and Ellie watched the progress of the great battalion of clouds, and wondered why they seemed so attracted by Moel Cree—just the very hill she wished them to avoid. The sun was shining brightly in the valley, and it was difficult

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to imagine that any danger could threaten anybody so near as the boys on the hillside; but she was just a little anxious and uncomfortable, and as they drove rapidly along the valley, and heard the mutterings of distant thunder, whilst the clouds gathered more and more heavily around them, blotting out the sunshine at last, and turning the brilliant colours on the hillsides to sombre browns and greys, she felt certain that her uncle was growing uneasy likewise. For he stood up several times to question the driver of the carriage, and from their gestures she was certain that they were talking about the boys on the hill, and what they would be likely to do if they were caught by the storm.

"Papa," she ventured to ask presently, "the boys will be all safe, will they not?"

"Oh yes, my dear, I quite think so. The man says there is a hut very near the top of the mountain, where an old shepherd lives, and if he saw the boys he would be certain to warn them that the storm was coming, and keep them there till it had passed. He sells food and things to travellers, and if the clouds hangs long on the hill, he will be sure to bring them down himself. I do not feel any real uneasiness. Lancelot has been to the hut before, and could certainly find it again, and Harry has so much shrewd common sense, he would never let Lance start without a guide if there were the least fear of

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being lost in the mist You must not be frightened, my dear."

Ellie tried not to be, and partly succeeded, though the thunder and lightning got rather bad as they drove, and the horses were sometimes frightened by it, although on the whole they behaved very well. It was a relief to all when the hotel which was their destination hove in sight through the rain, which was now descending in torrents, and Ellie looked quickly and eagerly round her as she entered, almost hoping that by some happy chance the boys had reached it before them. But plainly nothing had been heard of them, and she tried to believe that she had not even hoped it otherwise. Of course they could not possibly have got down in that time.

If Mr. Leslie were at all uneasy, at least he hid his anxiety very well, and talked cheerfully about the ravenous appetites of the boys when they did come down. Comfortable rooms had been engaged beforehand for the party, and when Elaine had unpacked some of her things and had stood for some time watching the rain pouring down the windows, she slipped downstairs and found her uncle in the hall, watching the progress of the storm from the open door.

"Papa," she said timidly, "the boys are certain to come in wet through, whatever happens. Don't you think it would be a good plan to have a nice fire lighted in their room, and some hot bricks all ready,

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and make them go straight to bed, whatever they say? You know it would be very awkward if they were to take a chill and be ill here; and I know that is the best thing to do to stop it."

"Bravo, little woman! you are as good as your aunt herself! I will give the order at once. Have you seen their rooms? Do you know if there are fireplaces in both?"

"It is one big room with two beds in it," answered Ellie. "I went to see, and there is a fireplace between the beds, and two nice windows. They will be very cosy and comfortable up there together. But I 'm sure they will want a fire."

Elaine shivered a little herself, partly with the cold that so quickly follows a thunderstorm, partly with a vague, undefined apprehension she could not explain. Her uncle kept assuring her that he was not uneasy—that he felt certain the boys were taking shelter in the shepherd's hut—the most sensible thing they could do; but still he hung about the door, watching the road by which they would most likely approach the hotel, and Ellie saw very plainly that he was very impatient for their safe return.

She was glad to have something to do in busying herself over the boys' room, and seeing everything made cheerful and comfortable there. The chamber-maid was a pleasant girl, and talked very amiably to the little lady, carrying out all her suggestions with great zeal, and growing quite interested herself in the

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poor young gentlemen whose climb had been so spoilt by the storm.

But Elaine could not sit still, and wandered from room to room and window to window, until about six o'clock she suddenly thought she saw something that caused her a great start.

Was that a boy running in a blind, reckless sort of way down a smooth green slope of grass not a quarter of a mile away? At first she thought it was too white to be that; but her eyes were very quick and keen, and presently she was certain that it *was* a boy—a boy without any coat on—running in his shirt sleeves, and running as if in the last stage of exhaustion and distress. In a moment she had dashed from her window, and was in the hall, pulling at her uncle's hand.

"Come! come!" she cried, "it is one of them—it is Harry, I think. Come—I will show you. Oh, I'm afraid something has happened."

The rain had almost ceased now, but had it been pouring it would have made no difference. Mr. Leslie only stayed to catch up his hat, Ellie rushed bare-headed on in front of him, and one or two of the hotel servants followed, catching the alarm from the hurried words and gestures of the pair.

On dashed Ellie round a corner of the house, and then there was no gainsaying her words; for there was Harry, his face perfectly white and bloodless, his breath coming in deep laboured gasps, coatless and

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hatless and lame, though still struggling blindly onwards, seeming neither to see nor hear those about him, until Ellie fairly tugged at his hand, and Mr. Leslie in anxious tones demanded what was amiss. Then he came to a sudden halt, and gazed for a moment at them in a half uncomprehending way; but rallying his powers he gasped out—

"Lancelot! he is hurt! not badly, I think, but hurt. In the little hut in the slate quarry, away to the east over there."

And then, as if with the relaxation of the strain, his own strength gave way, he made one step forward, and fell down in a faint.

"Carry him indoors, and send for the doctor," said Mr. Leslie, now not a little alarmed. "And, landlord, do you know what he means by this slate quarry where the other boy is? Have you a man here who can take me to it immediately? And how near can a horse and cart be got. I will pay anything for a sufficient escort."

"To be sure, sir, everything I have is at your disposal. There is but one slate quarry on Moel Cree, and there is a hut there, sure enough, so we can't mistake the place. I'll have a dozen stout fellows ready in a quarter of an hour from this, and a sort of a litter too; but horse and cart would only be in your way. There's no getting wheels near such a place. But the men will do the carrying by turns a deal better, and we'll have everything

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ready for the young gentleman by the time you get him here."

As for Ellie, she had obeyed a hastily spoken word from her uncle, and had followed the procession that was bearing Harry to his room. She had hardly taken in the sense of his words. All she had understood was that Lancelot was somewhere safe, and that he would soon be fetched away; and all her energies for the moment were engrossed with Harry himself, who looked dreadful, she thought; though very soon, when he was put to bed between hot blankets, and had had something hot put between his lips by the motherly landlady, he began to stir, and presently opened his eyes.

He looked round in a vague puzzled way at the strange faces round him, but catching sight of Ellie, seemed to recollect himself.

"Lance," he said, in a very low, weak voice, "where is he?"

"They have gone to fetch him," answered the little girl in her womanly, reassuring way. "You know you told them where he was, and they will soon bring him here."

Harry lay back with closed eyes for some minutes. He was so worn out that even thought was an effort; but thanks to Ellie's foresight, there was some strong hot soup ready in a very few minutes, and she took the spoon herself and gave it him, and very soon the colour came back to his face and the strength to his voice,

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and he was able to sit up in bed and tell her of his adventure.

"You see, after I had got him there and had made him as comfortable as I could, I was in a great hurry to get down and get help. I told him I felt sure the huts would be visited soonest, if search were made for us; but after I had got out into the mist and rain again, and made out what a long way this quarry must be out of the right track, I got horribly afraid that nobody would think of coming there, perhaps for days; and as poor Lance has certainly hurt himself and can't move alone, it put me in an awful 'taking' lest I should not get down, and he should have to stay there all night, and perhaps all next day—and I was afraid he might even die there all alone; and it was a dreadful thought that everything depended on my finding the way down."

"Oh, Harry, it must have been dreadful, and couldn't you see anything before you?"

"No, not a thing; you can't guess how weird and terrible it seemed, and the rain came down in sheets, and the lightning was so confusing I hardly knew what I was doing. If I had not had my compass I think I should be there still; however I kept going by it, in what I felt sure must be the right direction. But I could not get on fast, and time kept slipping and slipping away, and I was so tired I was afraid I might fall down and not be able to get up again.

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It was such a queer feeling. I never felt like it before."

"You were getting faint because you had had so little to eat and had walked such a long way," answered Ellie, sympathetically; "I know exactly how you felt. I felt exactly like that one morning when I got up and went a walk before breakfast. But go on."

"It was always go on—go on," answered Harry with a rather wan smile. "I kept saying that to myself until I felt quite silly. And just as I began to feel that my head was going round and round like a top, and that I should have to give up and lie down, whatever happened, I suddenly found myself out of the cloud, and close to the bottom of the hill, as it seemed, though it was really a good way up. But I could see houses, and all I had to do was to run as fast as I could till I got to them. It seemed to give me a new spurt, and I rushed on and on, rather as if I were somebody else; and I really think you know more about the rest than I do."

"Poor Harry!" said Ellie, still coaxing him to eat, though he was past any feeling of hunger, "what a day you have had; but I don't quite understand still. How did you lose your coat?"

"Oh, I left that with Lance. He was cold and damp. I'm afraid it did not make him much drier, but he was more comfortable with it, and I thought I could run better without it."

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"But you couldn't run when you were in the cloud. You must have been bitterly cold."

"Oh, I don't think I was. I was moving about all the time. It was Lance who was cold, lying still, and hurt."

"Is he much hurt, do you think? Poor Lancelot!" said Elaine, rather ashamed that she had not asked before.

"I don't know; not very badly, I think, for he could walk a little, though it seemed to hurt him. But he could never have got down the hill. I don't know what we should have done if we had not found the hut to put him in."

"I hope he won't be ill, or you either, Harry."

"Oh, I am never ill; nothing hurts me. I am very strong."

"Lancelot is not strong at all," said Ellie gravely. "I don't quite know how people know, for he has not often been ill; but I have heard them say that he has no constitution. I don't quite understand what that means; but I know that I have got one, and a very good one, although I am so often ill. If I hadn't, they all say I should have died ever so many times over."

Harry smiled languidly, wondering how any one could manage that, and Ellie laughed too; but they were both anxious about their companion, and eagerly awaited his return.

Time had passed by quickly, and it was not long

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before a sound of commotion below stairs announced that the cavalcade had returned, and Ellie ran to the head of the stairs and peeped over, coming back to say cheerfully,—

"Yes, they have got him quite safe, and they are bringing him up here. And he doesn't look half so bad as you did, Harry."

The next moment the door opened again, and Lancelot was carried in and laid on the bed, the doctor, who had just arrived, following to examine the condition of both boys.

"Hullo! old chap," said Lance, as he caught Harry's eye, "so they have made an invalid of you, too. What a lark!"

Greatly reassured by this greeting, Harry smiled back his reply, and in a few minutes the two boys were scanning each other, both being warmly tucked up in bed. But Lancelot had to go through a certain amount of discomfort at the doctor's hands before his bruised foot and strained shoulder were made right for the time; and then he dropped off to sleep in the midst of hearing Harry's tale; and Harry soon followed the good example set him, and slept soundly till morning.

Lancelot, however, did not follow him in this. He woke after a few hours in a state of feverish discomfort, and spent the night in turning and tossing, and in restless dreams that left him no peace. Ellie, stealing in with the first light of dawn, thought him looking

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very uncomfortable and flushed, and called his father to him; and before the next day had passed there was no mistaking the fact that he had taken a violent chill, and was in for a smart touch of fever of a rheumatic character.

Harry escaped with only a cold, and after a few days of weariness and disinclination to exert himself, was as well as ever. Mr. Leslie was as solicitous over him as over his own son, for though he said little on the subject, he knew perfectly from the account Lancelot gave of the adventure, that it was his doing the catastrophe had occurred at all; and that Harry had not only done all he could to persuade his comrade to keep on the right track, but had behaved when the crisis came with the utmost selfishness and presence of mind. Had it not been for him Lancelot would hardly have reached home alive, and if he were spared a sharp illness, it would be thanks to the promptitude and unselfish care of his comrade.

But a sharp illness Lance had, though it was short, and he seemed to rally with as much vigour as could be expected of one with his rather unsatisfactory physique. Harry was his most devoted nurse all the while he was ill, and the two boys were more inseparable than ever. Ellie was very much in request also, for there were numerous little offices about a sick room that only she could adequately perform. The wet weather which followed the thunderstorm kept every one to the house, and so it did not seem any privation

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to be with Lancelot, waiting on him and relieving the tedium of the sick room, and the three children were almost inseparable.

"I wish when we go home you would stop at Whitelands with us," said Lancelot one day, when he was sitting up for the first time by the fire, and they were talking of the journey home, which was to be undertaken as soon as the doctor would permit his patient to travel. "I don't know how we can do without him now, do you, Ellie?"

"No, indeed. I wish he would live with us always. Wouldn't you like to, Harry? You know you could go home every day to see your own people; but there are such a lot of them, and there are only two of us. And we shall miss you so."

Harry thought it very kind of them to say so, but smiled at the notion of making Whitelands his home.

"But I'm not in fun; I really mean it," said Lancelot, with a look of purpose on his thin face that struck Harry as being new to it. "I've heard the doctor tell papa that I shall have to be very careful this winter, and not go out in bad weather, or study much, or do a whole lot of things I expected to be able to do. I don't suppose I shall have a tutor, or go to school either, and it will be most awfully dull. I can't see why you should not spend most of your time with us. Come on a real long visit, and keep me company. Would you be willing if your parents would let you? Or would you think it too deadly dull?"

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Nobody ever appealed in vain to Harry's kindliness.

"Oh, of course, if you wanted me like that, and my father and mother would spare me, I should be very pleased to stay at Whitelands and cheer you up. But I don't suppose the elders would see it? They would say it was not necessary, as we lived so near."

"Living so near is precious little good in the dark, short days," said Lancelot. "It's the long evenings that one wants to enliven, and unless you are in the house you will be no good for that. Then, Harry, you will let me speak to my father? You will not mind on your own account?"

For one moment it did occur to Harry that Whitelands and Lancelot would be rather a poor exchange in winter evenings for Redlands and its merry family party, and that Edgar would have things more and more his own way in the absence of the elder brother; but hardly had the thought crossed his mind before he was heartily ashamed of it, and his answer was quickly and heartily spoken—

"Of course I will come if other people approve, and be very glad to do so. I am always sorry for fellows who can't go about and enjoy themselves. We will make models together, and have capital times, even if you can't skate and ride, and do all those things."

Lancelot looked very much gratified, and Ellie was really delighted, whilst she chatted to Harry of the things they would be able to do with his assistance. Lancelot gazed thoughtfully into the fire, a rather

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strange, wistful look, coming slowly into his face, though his companions did not see or heed it.

Mr. Leslie was much pleased with the idea of having Harry as a member of their household during the winter months, when Lancelot would be more or less shut up, and just at this time he would have tried with all his might to carry out any wish of his son's, for he had been told by the doctor that the boy's health was in a very critical state, and he feared that the seeds of the disease which had carried off the mother in the bloom of her youth might be germinating in the feeble constitution of her son. The doctor had not said so openly, but Mr. Leslie feared it was so from his manner, and his cautious way of speaking. Lancelot's langour, and weariness, and wan looks, were all attributed to his recent illness, which was in truth the immediate cause; but it was feared that there might be a graver danger ahead; and this made the father feverishly anxious to do anything that might be good for the boy, to strengthen his body, or give occupation of an agreeable nature to his mind.

An interchange of letters between the parents soon settled the matter, and it was agreed that when school began again, Harry should be a resident at Whitelands. Mr. Leslie made such a favour of it that Mr. and Mrs. Danvers did not like to refuse; and the boy himself had expressed himself as willing, if his parents were.

"It is very good of you, Harry," said Lancelot one

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day, shortly before the move was made. "I have a particular reason for wishing it so very much. One day perhaps I will tell you what that reason is. It makes me very happy to think of having you. And papa is so very fond of you too."

He looked dreamily out of the window as he spoke, and Harry wondered if it were his fancy that Lancelot's face was growing more beautiful, but thinner and paler every week.

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CHAPTER XI.

LANCELOT'S WISH.

"WELL, I don't know so much about the romance of the thing; but I call this altogether much jollier."

Madcap was sitting on the edge of the table, superintending the making of a batch of toffee at the schoolroom fire, over which Harry was burning his face and his fingers in his character of everybody's servant, whilst Elaine and Lancelot looked on with great interest, laughing alike at Madcap's chatter and Harry's comical remarks, as the mysterious compound heaved and bubbled under his manipulations.

The room the four friends occupied was a very pleasant and cheery one, facing due south over the park, so that it was generally flooded with sunshine; and when the evening drew on, as it was doing now, and the early autumn twilight was stealing over the outside world, the fire would be piled up with

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logs, and often with fir cones, and the dancing flames would cast such a ruddy glow over the whole room, that even sunshine itself could hardly be more cheerful.

"Oh, yes," answered Ellie, "I like this ever so much better. A secret alliance would have been very little good in the winter, especially now Lancelot cannot go out; but I always like to think that our friendship began in so romantic a way."

Harry laughed as he took off the saucepan to pour its boiling contents into a shallow pan, which had been well greased by Madcap in readiness.

"It began for me with a jolly good scolding, which I suppose I partly deserved; but whoever would have thought then that I should be a regular visitor here before the year was out?"

"Don't call yourself a visitor, Harry," said Lancelot, with what seemed an almost needless eagerness of manner. "You are not a visitor; you are just one of us. You are as much at home at Whitelands now as I am."

"Oh, that's all bosh," interrupted Madcap, in her downright way. "You can have Harry to stop with you, Lancelot, because you're rather ill, and it's nice to have a friend; but Harry belongs to us, and you can't get out of that. It's very good of us not to make a row and get him home again, for we miss him dreadfully in the long evenings. Edgar isn't half as nice, and none of the games and things go quite as they used

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to do when he was there. And we quarrel twice as much, too. Harry kept the peace, somehow. And it's horrid sometimes without him, so you needn't go on as if he belonged here, for he is our Harry after all."

Madcap spoke in the eager, vehement way characteristic of her, and as for Harry, he quite flushed with gratification.

Lancelot was lying on a couch before the fire. He very often occupied that comfortable couch nowadays, and it excited no remark when he did so, for children soon get used to anything. He was not so pale and wan as he had been for some time after his illness in the summer; but there was a transparent whiteness upon his face that Harry, boy though he was, did not like to see.

The bright flush that often gave his face such a glow and so much passing beauty, was not the flush of health, and he grew thinner week by week, and less and less inclined to exert himself; but the change came slowly and gradually, and was hardly heeded by those who saw him every day.

Elaine, who had often been very ailing herself during the winter months, was full of sympathy for her playmate, but was not anxious about him; and Lancelot's spirits were very good, and he was more gentle and unselfish and loveable than before. But he clung more and more to Harry as days passed by, and seemed never quite satisfied unless he were present.

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During the morning hours when Harry was at school, the invalid kept to his room, for he could not sleep during the early part of the night, and his best rest was generally in the morning; so that he was seldom up and dressed much before luncheon time.

Madcap and Elaine studied together under the same daily governess, the lessons being all given at Whitelands; for Madcap could run across the park in all weathers, and slip in through the tunnel, which still remained open and constituted the shortest cut to the house, whereas Elaine would often have been hindered from coming to Redlands; and now that the parents of the children were such friends, all these details had been settled without the least difficulty.

It seemed to some people a strange thing, that two men so apparently different in taste and temperament as Mr. Leslie and Mr. Danvers, should take such a great liking for one another; but such had been the case, commencing with Mr. Danvers' visit to the hotel in Wales, whither he had come over in answer to the pressing invitation of his neighbour, and it only cemented more firmly with every month as it passed by.

The children were both amused and gratified by it. Mrs. Danvers was confessedly pleased, and was on very cordial terms with Miss Arkley, who now consulted her about the two children under her care, and quite

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"He sat down and waited for Lancelot to begin, but the opening words surprised him." *p.* 197.

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relied upon her for advice with regard to Lancelot's condition.

Mrs. Danvers had had but little illness among her own healthy brood, but she had seen something of sickness in her early life, and was full of sympathy and tenderness for the boy, who she feared was fast fading away; and there was something in her way of talking and caressing him that won Lancelot's heart completely, so it was always a red-letter day to him when Harry's mother had been to Whitelands.

All the party from Redlands were welcome to come and go as they would at the other house; but of course it was Harry and Madcap who were the real inmates.

It was a great advantage to both little girls to be so much together. Elaine was gradually losing her little stilted ways of speech and small mannerisms and affectations, whilst Madcap, though retaining all her old high spirits, was toning down from some of her hoydenish ways, and those expressions which do not sound pretty from the lips of a little girl, though they are less criticised when spoken by a brother. Madcap did not know she was learning anything, but once or twice she had been a little abashed at the look on Ellie's face, when she had come out with one of her favourite slang expressions; and without knowing it, she had learnt to check her too literal imitation of the boys, and had improved thereby without losing any of her freshness or spirit.

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She was waiting now for the summons from below to say good-night and go. Her father was with Mr. Leslie down stairs. He came in regularly twice or three times a week to have a chat and a cup of tea, and on these occasions Madcap remained upstairs until sent for to go home with him. If he did not come, Harry often walked with her, and saw his mother and the others. He did not attend every class at school, having grown beyond some of them. His time was more his own than it had been hitherto, and he was studying hard himself, though he had heard nothing definite, so far, as to his future career, and wondered what was being arranged.

Edgar had spoken definitely about going to Oxford, and considered it as settled in his case; but nothing seemed as yet to have been decided as to Harry's own destiny in life.

When Madcap made her not unnatural claim upon her brother, Lancelot suddenly raised his eyes and looked from one to the other. There was something in the glance which neither of them understood, and it had the affect of silencing Madcap, and making her feel for a moment quite sad and uncomfortable: but a diversion was effected by the expected summons from downstairs, and she danced off with Elaine to put on her things, leaving Harry and Lancelot together.

But though Harry almost expected him to say something — plainly there was something on his

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mind which he half wished to utter—it did not come then.

Lancelot turned his gaze upon the fire, and lay very still, looking into the red blaze, and Harry, after a brief silence, went off to wash his hot hands and face after his culinary task was accomplished. Then, when he came back the room was lighted up, and preparations for tea were in progress.

But that night, when he went the last thing into Lancelot's warm room to say good-night, and to see that he was all comfortable and had everything he wanted by him, he found his comrade in anything but a mood for sleep. The two rooms opened one into the other, and at night the door was always left ajar, so that a call from Lancelot could bring his companion to his side in a moment; and on cold nights Harry generally got up at least once, in order to replenish the fire. So it was no unusual thing for them to enjoy a chat at night, when Harry came in to see that all was right; and he was not surprised at the suggestion to make himself comfortable in the armchair by the fire and have a quiet talk.

And yet there was something in Lancelot's face that seemed to imply that the talk would not be quite after the ordinary fashion of boyhood. There was a luminous brightness in his eyes, and a half wistful, half confident appeal that struck Harry as being something at once new and strange.

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He sat down where he could see Lancelot, and waited for him to begin, but the opening words surprised him a little.

"Harry, when Madcap was claiming you for Redlands this evening, and we wanted to call you a resident of Whitelands, you did not say anything yourself."

"Didn't I? Well, what was there to say?"

"You didn't say if you should be willing or not to belong here altogether."

Harry's eyebrows went up in not unnatural surprise.

"Why, Lance, of course that would be absurd. I like being here whilst you want me, and there's nothing out-of-the-way in my staying with you for a spell—but——."

Here Lancelot interrupted quickly—

"You are willing to be here because I want you, Harry; would you be willing to stay on if somebody else wanted you very much indeed—more, perhaps, than I do?"

Harry was perplexed and a little distressed at Lancelot's manner, and at the look upon his face.

"I do not understand you," he said; "I think we must be talking at cross purposes. I shall have my own way to make in life to a certain extent. I shall not be much longer at home, I suppose, even at Redlands. Of course it would be impossible for me to stay here indefinitely. You must see that for yourself."

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Lancelot was silent for a moment, and then he said in a very low tone—

"Harry, I want you to stay and comfort my father when I am gone."

Harry started, and turned a look of consternation upon him.

"What do you mean?"

There was a strange smile in the boy's eyes. He lay looking into the fire, and Harry looked at him.

"I thought you must know by this time; I thought everybody must know. Harry, I shall never be any better than I am. I am dying; and I know it."

"Lancelot, Lancelot! How can you know that? You are very weak and ill, but people much worse than you get better."

"I shall not get better," answered the boy quietly; "I seem to feel it in myself, and I know my father begins to see it now. He wanted to take me abroad —I heard him talking so eagerly to the doctor just outside my door one day; but he told him it would be no use. Of course I knew then what that meant. And, Harry, I don't think I mind. Sometimes I think I could be rather glad, if it were not for my father."

Harry did not know what to say. He had been anxious about his friend before, but had never thought his case serious—certainly not hopeless. He sat still in a sort of dismay.

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"I don't think I should have made a nice kind of man if I had grown up," said Lancelot, with a quaint gravity that might have provoked a smile under other circumstances. "I have always felt as if there was something wrong with me—something wanting. I don't care for the things other boys like, and I've always been rather selfish, from having had so much of my own way perhaps. I detest selfish men; I can see how horrid they grow up; but I'm afraid I should have been one of them. And I don't think I should ever have been really strong, and that's a great drawback to a man."

"I suppose it is," said Harry in a low voice.

"I was rather wicked about it at first," said the boy, turning a bright look on his companion; "I thought it seemed hard to be taken away out of everything, before one had really had time to see what life was like; but since I've had so much time for thinking, all that sort of feeling has gone away. I think I'm glad now, for I get very tired of everything, and I'm not frightened, because I keep thinking of Him who went through the valley before us, and I'm sure He will help me through. I can't talk good like boys in books; but, Harry, I'm really quite happy. I've got nothing on my mind now except my father, and I want you to try and take him off."

"What do you mean, Lance?"

Harry spoke rather huskily, but with no lack of feeling.

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"Why, you see, it does seem rather sad for my poor father to have no son left to care for, or to care for him. Ellie will be left, to be sure; but you know a man never thinks of a girl as he does of a boy; and Ellie is not his own child. It's possible she may not live. Harry, you know you are a kind of cousin—not a near one. Would you be willing to try to be a son to my father in my place when I am gone? He likes you better than anybody in the world, after me, and he always says that you are the noblest and best boy he ever saw in his life——"

"Don't!" cried Harry, who could not bear to be praised.

"But I must; I want you to understand, because I do want this thing so very much. My father always tells people that you are a bit of a hero in your way. He thinks it was splendid of you to do what you did on the hills that day—give me every bit of food and wine we had, and cover me up with your own coat and mackintosh, and then go out alone in the fog and rain, over an unknown path, to try and get help."

"Why, it was the only thing I *could* do," answered Harry, almost impatiently; but Lancelot went on serenely—

"Oh, yes, you think so; but other people can think of a good many things some boys would have thought of doing first. Well, never mind that. I know you don't like hearing praises sung; but I want you to

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understand that you are very dear to my father, and all the more so for your goodness to me now, which will go on, I know, so long as I want it. Harry, no one can be a real son to my father, of course; but *you* might do a very great deal to comfort him, if you would be willing. I want to ask you if you would consent, if he were some day to ask you? It would make me so happy if I knew that you would."

Harry felt rather like one in a dream.

"What do you want me do?"

Lancelot was looking eager and bright. He spoke with the vivid interest of one to whom this mental picture was nothing new. Plainly he had thought out the situation again and again, until its every detail was familiar.

"Why, I want you just to take my place here, as far as ever you can. I should like you to take father's name as well as your own, and let Whitelands be your home, and go to college, as I should have done; but spend your vacations here with him, and be just such a son to him as I should have liked to be; though I don't believe I should ever have reached my ideal, and I think you will. Father is the sort of man who likes companionship, and wants an interest in life—the sort of interest a son can give, and nobody else. You are clever, and he admires talent. You are very unselfish, and he thinks that is the very best quality in a man or woman. And you are a relation too, and he is very fond of you, and you are the only friend I have ever

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made. Oh, Harry, don't say it is all nonsense, and that you could not think of such a thing! Think how sad and lonely my dear father will be when I am gone. Wouldn't it be real pleasure to you to try and comfort him?"

"Yes, Lancelot; I would do everything I could for him most gladly. He has always been very kind to me, and I think he likes me; but—but I do not think you quite understand. One can't transfer oneself from one father to another. And I have my own parents living. And besides that ——"

Harry stopped short in embarrassment. He hardly knew how to frame his next objection; but it seemed as if Lancelot understood it.

"Oh, I know what you mean. You think that my father is rich, and that it might seem as if you wanted to get something by it if you were to do what I ask; but indeed you needn't be afraid of that. There's nobody who can be hurt if he makes you his heir, as I hope he will. Elsie will be very rich some day on her own account, and she would be dreadfully oppressed by more property, and by Whitelands. And you know she is a girl, and a man wants a son to come after him, or some one who will carry on his name, as you might if you would take it as well as your own. You might marry her some day, perhaps," added Lance, with a little boyish laugh; "but you need not be afraid of supplanting her. She is one of mamma's relations, and quite rich; and I know my father wishes to leave

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his property to his side of the family; and as I tell you, there is nobody to whom he has taken such a fancy as you. And then it would unite Redlands and Whitelands again, as they used to be, and that would be a very romantic sort of end to it all. Oh, Harry, it may be all a fancy of mine; but I have a feeling that my father will ask it of you. Please, will you think it over, and try not to say 'No' if ever it should come?"

Harry was very grave and thoughtful. He was old enough to realise that this thing might mean something very serious for him, and yet, as Lancelot put it, it might just be possible.

Mr. Leslie's partiality for him had not been unnoticed, and of late his manner had been kinder than ever, and he had seemed to lean on Harry, and to confide in him, and consult him even, in a fashion that was certainly strange. It had not occurred to Harry before that he could ever be anything to the master of Whitelands, save the friend of his son; but it seemed now as if some fresh tie might be established between them. But it was all so very unexpected.

"Have you thought yet, Harry?" asked the impatient Lancelot, after a long pause.

Harry almost smiled at the idea of his having made up his mind on such a point, without having the least idea whether it was not all a fanciful notion engendered by sickness, but a look into Lancelot's wistful face

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showed how earnestly his heart was set upon the matter, and he answered gently and thoughtfully—

"Indeed, Lance, I will do anything I can for your father; but such an important thing as that could not be settled by any one except my own father and mother. But if it will be any comfort to you to know, I promise you this, that if he wishes anything from me, and if my own parents agree to it for me, I will not hold back myself. It all sounds so strange, that I can hardly believe such a thing will ever come to pass; but if your father were to wish me to take his name, and belong in a way to him, and if my father and mother thought it right for me to do it, I will consent to do my part, and I will do everything I can to fill your place, and to be a good son to him instead of you."

Lancelot's face was all in a glow.

"Oh, thank you, Harry. You have made me very happy. I do not seem to have anything left to wish for now."

He turned on his pillows, and was soon asleep; but Harry sat a long time by the fire, pondering upon all that had happened, and wondering if the strange idea suggested to him were anything but a romance of Lancelot's own brain.

He was off in the morning long before his companion was astir, and he was later back than usual, having gone home first for an hour or two.

He met Madcap and his father returning to the

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house as he quitted it, and knowing that Lancelot would be likely to be wanting him, he hastened back, and up to the firelit room, to see what kind of a day he had passed.

The confidence of last night had left traces of gravity upon Harry, and he felt very tender over the comrade he feared he was soon to lose. So far death had never touched any one whom the boy had intimately known, and it seemed a strange and solemn thing that the day must so soon come when Lancelot would be no more amongst them. He had been talking to his mother about his friend, hoping that she would be able to encourage him to hope; but she had only looked sorrowful, and had shaken her head, telling him softly and gently that Lancelot's days were surely numbered, and that all they could do was to cheer and brighten what was left to him of life, and do what they could to comfort those who were left.

No lamps had been lit in the schoolroom when Harry entered it, and rather to his surprise he found Mr. Leslie there, alone with his son.

Fond as he was of the boy, he did not often seek private interviews, and generally the lad would go down to him in his study, if he wanted to talk to his father.

But to-day he was sitting by the boy's couch, holding his thin hand, and looking into his face; and when Harry saw them thus together, he would have drawn back and gone quietly away; but Lancelot had seen

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him, and would not permit it, but called him hastily back.

"Come, Harry, we were just talking about you. I was hoping you would come in before father went away. Harry is quite one of us, isn't he, father? If I had had a brother, I should have liked him to be just like Harry; only then he would have been the favourite always, and I should have been left out in the cold."

Mr. Leslie's face was rather grave and set, and there were lines of sorrow traced in it which went to Harry's sensitive heart. Had he been self-conscious he might have felt some embarrassment; but Harry was seldom troubled with that feeling—he thought too little of himself.

He went forward and leant over Lancelot, asking him how he had passed his day, and arranging his cushions as he knew best suited the invalid, and all with the quiet gentleness that a kind elder brother might show, whilst Lance plainly looked up to him with an affection not always to be found with brothers, and showed that there was much to love in the companion of his choice.

After watching them for a few moments, in which several expressions of mingled pleasure and pain crossed his face, Mr. Leslie rose and quitted the room, and Lance, taking hold of Harry's hand, said, with a playfulness that only veiled without hiding the deeper feeling below,—

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"I have had such a nice, happy talk with father, and I believe it is all just as I thought. I am almost sure everything will come right in the end—and, oh, Harry, I am sure no one will comfort him as well as you. I am quite happy about him now."

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CHAPTER XII.

CHRISTMAS.

CHRISTMAS at Redlands was wont to be a very merry season. There were no gaps in the family there to suggest painful memories, and the children of the house had a fine fund of gay spirits, which carried them buoyantly through any festivity, and made it a pleasure to be with them in their enjoyment.

But this year Christmas was being kept somewhat more quietly than usual, and though there was plenty of real sunshine in the house, there was less outward demonstration of jollity; for the presence of a little black-robed figure moving quietly amongst them kept in check anything like riotous mirth, though little Ellie was the first to ask them "not to be unhappy—because dear Lancelot would have been so sorry for their Christmas to be spoiled."

But after all it was not spoiled to any of them, for

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their kindness to the little lonely girl, who had come to them to be comforted in the great loss she had sustained.

A year ago Madcap would have unhesitatingly declared that it would have been "an awful bore" to have had anyone in trouble about them at Christmas time; but after having eagerly averred to her mother her wish to have Ellie with them, and to help to comfort her, she not only did her very utmost for her little friend, but found out, rather to her astonishment, that being graver and quieter did not really make her less happy, and that there was a warmer, softer, sweeter feeling about this Christmas than there had been at any preceding season. Whilst Ellie, on her part, did all she could to put her own grief aside, and enter into the busy preparations around her for bringing Christmas light and brightness into poorer homes; and so the children learnt, each in a different way, that it was a blessed and a happy thing to weep with those who weep, as well as to rejoice with those who rejoice.

And sorrow with children is not the dead, constant pain that it often becomes as we grow older, when the loss of a loved one means the uprooting of a lifetime of sweet associations. The grief of children comes in vehement bursts, and between whiles the sunshine is bright about them, and they can smile and play, and feel really happy. They are saved the weary ache that cannot be relieved by tears; they are in the

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April-tide of life, where the showers, though frequent and sharp, are gilded by the sunlight that so quickly follows.

And then Elaine did not feel that she was utterly alone. Had not Lancelot himself told her that Harry would be a brother to her now? And had she not felt, ever since she had come to that house, whither it had been thought wise to move her when Lancelot had ceased to need her, that she was under his most especial care and protection?

She might be nominally Madcap's companion, might share her little white bedroom, and wander about the house with her by day; but when the evening hours came, and games and laughter were the order of the day, when the firelight flickered over the panelled walls of the big play-room, and all sorts of plans and bits of mischief were under discussion, then it was that Ellie would look (and never looked in vain) for Harry to come over to her quiet corner, and talk in his gentle, kindly way to her of anything that was in his mind or hers.

It was not always grave talk, it was not certainly in any way remarkable or original; but to Ellie that was always the happiest hour of the day. And though she dearly loved all the kind friends who thought so much about her, and tried so hard to help her to bear her trouble, there was nobody who could be to her what Harry was; for he seemed not a friend only, but like a very dear brother. Had not Lancelot called him

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"brother" as he lay dying? And had he not held his hand to the last, and given him almost his latest smile?

And so the bond between the tall boy and the fragile little girl was a very strong one; and as Harry himself was more grave and thoughtful just now than was his wont, it was no wonder that those two liked better to sit side by side in a corner and watch the others at play, than to take any very active share in the fun themselves.

But Ellie thought that the Christmas tree for some of the poor little cottage children was a very pretty sight, and she very much admired the easy, merry way that Madcap set on foot the games that succeeded the distribution of simple little gifts. She was always shy with other children, and would not have known how to teach them to play; but Madcap was never at a loss, and was ably seconded by Ben.

Harry had been invaluable over the tree itself; but he was rather big to romp with the little rustics. He awed them into awkwardness by his length of limb, and seemed altogether too much of the grown-up gentleman.

So he sought out Ellie in her dim corner, and the two sat together watching, not talking much, but none the less content for that. At least Elaine looked perfectly content, whilst on the boy's face there rested a shadow of deep thought, which made him look older than his years, and which gave him (in Ellie's opinion,

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at least) something of the look of a young knight keeping his vigil on the eve of his knighthood.

Presently, when there was a move into the tea-room, Harry, instead of following the others, stepped out into the clear brightness of the moon-lit winter's night, and stood leaning on the balustrade of the terrace, looking over the frosty park, with its silver lights and ebony shadows. He had not been there long before the sound of footsteps, close beside him, roused him from his reverie, and he saw that his father was standing at his side.

"Well, Harry," said Mr. Danvers, with his grave smile; "and is your decision ready yet? You were to have till Christmas for it."

Harry stood straight up and looked at his father earnestly.

"I think it is," he answered; "I should have been glad if you and mother would have decided for me; but I suppose you know best in wishing me to choose. Father, I think I will do it, as you are willing. It does seem strange at first; but I think I shall be nearer to you by making a home at Whitelands than by doing anything else open to me. The time is coming when I should be little more at home, in any case; and then, if I am off your hands, you will be able to give more advantages to the rest. And, father, I want to beg one thing of you, I should so like to feel that you would make Edgar master of Redlands by-and-bye. I know it seems a queer thing to talk

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about; but I should hate to have so much and he so little. He is very clever, and he will be a credit to his name; and it would be so jolly to feel that I should always have a brother close by."

"But, Harry, I don't think it will do to reckon on your being made heir of Whitelands. I know that Mr. Leslie means it now—if you consent to his proposition—and the fact that you are really almost as nearly connected to him by blood as any one in the world gives a certain stability to your claim; but there are many contingencies to be thought of. It does not do to make sure of things. We had better leave these matters out of our thoughts altogether."

"Yes, father; indeed, I am not exactly reckoning on it. But Mr. Leslie keeps saying things which set me thinking. And I am quite sure that whatever he does about the property, he will be generous to me, and leave me quite well enough off without anything more; and so I did want to ask you to divide anything you had amongst the others. You often tell me you are not a rich man, so I cannot help thinking about things; and if you would only not bother any more about me, but let the others have the advantage——"

"Harry, my boy, tell me one thing—you are not doing this thing against the grain, for the sake of the others?"

"N—no," answered Harry, after a moment's hesitation. "No, father, I do not think, indeed, that I am.

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Of course, if I were an only son, or there were only a pair of us, perhaps I should not think so much of it, and my duty would seem more at home; but indeed I have decided on a great many grounds. I almost promised Lancelot; and poor Mr. Leslie is so lonely, and he has been so very, very good to me. And there is the little girl too—oh, and lots of things. I shouldn't know how to refuse when it came to the point, I know. And then I feel, too, that I shall see almost more, instead of less of you all, by doing it than if I went off to our cousin's bank. And now Edgar and I will both be at Oxford together; and we shall so enjoy that."

Mr. Danvers was not generally a demonstrative man, and his caresses were so rare that Harry almost started when he felt an arm laid across his shoulders and heard his father's voice speaking in accents of unwonted feeling.

"Well, God bless you, my dear boy. I believe you have decided rightly, and I am certain that you have decided in an unselfish spirit, and have thought last of yourself throughout, as is your way. I am afraid that I have sometimes misjudged you, owing mainly to this very trick of yours; but if I have, I hope it is for the last time. I think I understand you better than I have hitherto done, and I trust, my dear boy, that we shall understand one another better and better as the years go on."

Harry did not attempt to speak, but he grasped

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his father's hand in mute gratitude and happiness: and at that moment the sound of footsteps upon the frozen drive announced the arrival of some belated guest.

Mr. Danvers smiled slightly.

"I suspect it is Mr. Leslie coming for his answer. He has found it hard work to wait for it. Shall we call him, and let him have it at once, Harry?"

"If you like," answered the boy, rather shrinking from the ordeal, but reflecting that it might just as well be got over now as any other time; and the next moment the two friends were beside him.

"Well, Leslie," his father was saying, "you have won your cause. I and his mother have left the decision in his own hands, and he has thought it all out in what I am convinced is a right and a manly spirit. As you are such a near neighbour, and a family connexion to boot, I really have little to grumble at, and I know you will deal justly and kindly by the boy. I believe, in some ways you have understood him better than I have done. I am confident that you will do all in your power to make him happy."

And Harry, coming forward, laid his hand in that of his kinsman, and said in a low voice—

"If you will let me, sir, I will try to be a son to you in place of Lancelot."

Mr. Leslie was glad it was so dark, and that Mr. Danvers had the kindly tact to speak again to cover

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the pause, for he could not have uttered a word, though he held the lad's hand in his, and wrung it hard.

"God bless you, my boy," he muttered hoarsely, when at length he could find voice; and then he took his friend's arm, and marched off with him, and Harry, rather to his relief, was free to go whither he would.

Now that his decision had been declared, and that the responsibility of uncertainty was off his mind, he felt as if a load had been lifted from his spirits, and that he could be a boy once more. He hoped he had done right; he thought his father and mother really approved; and when it was said and done, it really seemed such a very simple thing. Instead of going far away from home to be turned into a banker, he was to live within a mile of his own people, to go to college with his brother, and to spend his vacations close to his old home. It would not be half the break-up that would have followed upon the selection of any career for himself, and he would be free to follow his own bent as to the future, unfettered by anything beyond the affectionate wish of his adopted father to keep him as much as possible at home. Then, as Mr. Leslie was neither a selfish nor a foolish man, this point was not likely to be strained beyond reasonable limits.

And really there was a great deal of very congenial occupation to be had about the farms and in

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the improvement of the fine old property, which of late years had suffered considerable neglect. It was no wonder that the boy's heart gave a bound of joy, as all these things came crowding into his mind, for Harry had a great love for his home and all home ties, and had always felt a good deal of shrinking from the thought of going out into the world alone.

For a time he paced up and down the frost-bound garden paths absorbed in thought, and when at last the sound of voices—children's voices dying away in the distance—roused him to the knowledge that the humble little guests had departed, he reproached himself for having been so engrossed in his own affairs as not to have done his duty by them, and hurried to the house to see if he had been missed.

His brothers and the two little girls were in the hall, which was a favourite resort on winter evenings, as it was protected by double doors from any cold blast from without, and was always kept warmed by a glowing fire.

As Harry entered he saw that his father and mother were just departing into the study together, and from the excited looks upon the faces of the children assembled there, he saw that the important announcement had just been made to them. He was glad not to have to make it himself, and stood for a moment in a sort of boyish confusion on the threshold (for Harry never felt as if it were right for him to be looked upon as a person of paramount importance, such

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as he undoubtedly was at that juncture); but Madcap broke away from Ellie, who was clasping her hands tight, and did away with all embarrassment by jumping into Harry's arms, and flinging her arms round his neck.

"Oh, you dear old boy—I am so glad you are going to be Ellie's brother as well as mine! I always did say it was a pity you had not more sisters—you are such a nice, jolly old brother. And now you will never have to go away into that dirty old bank, or out to India, or any place like that, after your horrid old engineering, if you had got your own way about a profession. You will always live close to us, and be a jolly country gentleman and master of the foxhounds—just what I should like to be if I were a man. And I think it's quite the nicest thing that could have possibly happened, for I always did say it would be quite beastly when you went away from home, as most boys have to do when they turn into men."

Harry's face glowed as he put it down to receive Madcap's warm kisses, and he did not even look a rebuke as the ugly word passed her lips; for was it not spoken in her excitement and pleasure at keeping him near? And how could he say anything ungracious in answer to such a loving speech?

"I congratulate you, old fellow," said Edgar, coming up and slapping him on the back. "I'm awfully glad too"; and the warm hand-shake between the brothers spoke well for their mutual understanding

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and good-will, whilst Ben capered round in glee, and cried,—

"And I shall be able to go in for the 'dirty old bank,' as Madcap calls it, after all, and I'll be the richest man of you all yet. I'll write to Cousin What's-his-name to-morrow my own self—you see if I don't—and ask him to keep the berth for me. Now you two fellows are going to be swells and 'Varsity men, it is time for me to be settling on my humble and honest career. I shall go in for the bank!"

And whilst Ben was settling his own future in this high-handed way, Madcap led Harry up to Ellie, who was looking eagerly at him, her liquid dark eyes swimming in a haze of happy tears.

The girl kissed her lovingly as she said, drawing Harry forward,—

"You must not mind if she does cry. It is only because she is a dear little goose, and cries because she is so glad. She has just set her heart on having you for a brother, Harry, and I've been telling her what a jolly old brother you are."

Madcap's own voice was just a little unsteady, and she ended by a laugh which sounded rather funny, for something in Ellie's face touched her unwontedly, and she was half afraid she might disgrace herself for ever in Ben's eyes by beginning to cry all about nothing. But Harry took the tremulous little hands held out to him very tenderly in his, and bent down and gave a real loving kiss to the down-bent quivering face.

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"You will let me be your brother, will you not, Ellie?" he said softly, "for Lancelot's sake."

And she suddenly put her arms about his neck, and her soft curls swept over his face as she made her little sobbing answer,—

"Oh, Harry, Harry, I am so glad. I did want you for a brother so very much. I think I can be happy again now."

Madcap was capering about and making sundry grimaces in order to regain her habitual command of her tongue, and now she thought it time to interpose, lest the tears should get too strong a hold and conquer the smiles, which would never do on Christmas Eve, of all times in the world.

"Oh, isn't it funny?" she cried. "I think it's the funniest thing ever was. Boys, do you remember how angry we were in the spring with those horrible Leslies, and how we vowed we'd have a great immense feud with them always, and made them our deadly enemies? And instead of that they've turned into our greatest friends, and we've let them have Harry almost for their own, and that makes us all like brothers and sisters. Who would ever have thought of such a thing? It's the funniest thing I ever heard of."

"Well at any rate, it's a very good thing too," said Harry, standing by Ellie, and stroking her curls with the soft, caressing touch so comforting to her. "I don't much see the sense of having enemies anywhere—

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certainly not amongst one's neighbours. Friends are better, better than foes any day, as we have all of us found out long ago. I don't think there will ever be any more quarrels between the Leslies and the Danvers, or between Whitelands and Redlands. We have signed the conditions of a permanent peace, and I shall be the hostage to guarantee their being faithfully kept—eh, Ellie?"

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